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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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Know Your West

A Department For Western Story Readers

By Harold Gluck

TROUBLE ON THE RANGE

THERE WAS a serious look on the face of Jeff Neils, owner of the Bar H ranch. He was a tanned, weather-beaten little Westerner, with faded blue eyes and long drooping moustache, and he only wanted to live out his remaining days in peace. But the time had come for a decision, and he was not one afraid to face the facts—no matter how unpleasant they might seem.

At his side was a tall, lanky man who knew how to take orders as well as to give them. Sam McCool was a good foreman, with lots of common sense under that big mop of red hair that always seemed out of place. "Boss," he said, "there isn't enough space on the range for sheepmen and us cattle-folks. The boys are just itching to even up the score with Hank Evans, ever since he went complain' to the sheriff. Just say the word and we'll ride over the county

[*Turn To Page* 8]

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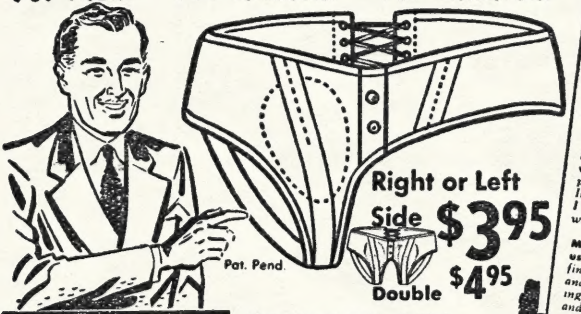

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line and leave our callin' card where it hurts most."

Neils shook his head in the negative. "The trouble with gunplay is that you never know just where it's goin' to end. You forget that Hank has lots of friends, who served in the last campaign against the Indians; they can handle a six-shooter as well as a Winchester. I think I have a better solution."

Sam McCool surmised what was in his boss' mind, but he merely said, "Go ahead; I'm listenin' to what you want done. Gunplay or no gunplay, the time has come to show them sheep men just where we stand on the matter."

"All you and the boys have to do," explained Jeff Neils, "is to get Hank's sheep to go to the south of the canyon. Then you can use your judgement as to what should be done. Perhaps you can ride his flock right over the canyon so their bodies will pile up down below: maybe you'll have to give them some hot lead. I don't care what you do, so long as people aren't hurt."

The boys in the bunkhouse were waiting for their foreman. He walked in and came right to the point. "When we get through with the day's work, there'll be plenty of space for our stock. Jeff doesn't want any of the sheepmen hurt, so don't make a mistake between something that goes on two feet and on four feet."

AT THE county line, you could see Hank's sheep wagon. It was nothing but a common farm-wagon with a wide bottomed bed, covered with a rounded top of very thick canvas. In the back end there was a window; in front was a doorway. The door was made in two halves, permitting the top to be opened while the bottom remained closed.

Hank was a husky, middle-aged man who had tried everything from farming to prospecting, from fighting to sheep raising. He was standing outside of the wagon, looking at the group of armed friends who had come to answer his call.

"This fellow Jeff Neils thinks he owns everything, just because he came here when it was Indian country," Hank explained. "I think it be time that Neils moved on to a place that's healthier for him and those blasted cattle he raises."

Lou Mallet was born with curiosity in his soul. "Mind tellin' me, Jeff," he asked, "just what you got against beef. I'll eat anything, so long as I'm hungry. Why is it you sheepmen can't get on with the cattle-men?"

There was a look of disgust written all over Hank's round face. "Shucks," he began, "I thought everyone knew why we sheep fellows hate them ranchers. Take the matter of grass. Cattle eat the grass so close it dies; then they destroy the range over which they travel by trampling out the grass and leaving the ground bare. Cattle leave such a terrible odor on the grass, and at water-holes, that sheep just refuse to eat or drink after them. No use arguin' about it; we just got to show them cattle folks their place."

Mallet's keen eyes shifted to the left and observed some mounted men on the horizon. "Look there, Jeff," he said, "I think there's trouble goin' someplace. We got guns and plenty of ammunition, so I say we go look for trouble instead of it lookin' for us." And before sunset, the range was going to be stained with human blood. For men have always quarreled over something, somewhere, at any time.

QUESTION: Can you spot the big error in the text of this story? If you didn't get it the first time, you may have to reread the story; it's a very fundamental error.

(You'll find the answer at the end of this department.)

●

HENRY'S BUFFALOES

JACOB FALK, owner of the IO ranch, put his name on the bottom of the document, then handed it

[*Turn To Page* 105]

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Mr. Moon
Give Me More, More, More
Mosie Makin' Mamma from Memphis
Baby, We're Really in Love
I Wanna Play House With You
Hey, Good Lookin'
Alabama Jubilee

Let's Live a Little
Always Late
Cryin' Heart Blues
Cold, Cold Heart
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Slow Poke
Let Old Mother Nature Have Her Way
Crazy Heart
Mom And Dad's Waltz

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Onward, Christian Soldiers
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Church In The Wildwood
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There Is Power In The Blood
Leaning On The Everlasting Arms
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Jesus Keep Me Near The Cross
Softly And Tenderly Jesus Is Calling
Rock Of Ages
A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
My Soul Thirsts For Peace
It Is No Secret
Who Can Be Sick While God Is Well
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Crazy Joe's Gold

Feature Novel of Deadly Avarice

Some feared the desert, some feared the Shoshones who guarded Crazy Joe's mine, and some feared the curse upon it. But greed sent one body of men out to follow another who feared none of these things—and to whom the gold meant nothing. Lannier, who hunted gold for sport . . .

By William Hopson

FROM DARWIN, far down in the great Mojave Desert's flatter country, he had followed his three well-trained pack-burros on the slow trek eastward over burning sands and black lava-beds. At Burro Pass, fifty-two hundred feet above sea-level, he entered the Panamint Range of mountains, then descended into the hell that was Death Valley itself. Here the ground became patches of white encrusted sand—borax—with now and then a wet spot undrinkable by anything that lived.

At Stove-Pipe Wells—so-named because of a length of it left by immigrants dead these twenty years—Lannier camped two days and rested the burros and his mongrel dog Pat. He needed no rest himself, this tall, powerfully-built, blond man of thirty. The fact that he was almost a legend among other men of his kind, who preferred the lonely life, meant nothing at all. The knowledge that he had made three strikes in five years had given him satisfaction, but his was not the lust of other men for yellow metal. His pleasure came in the seeking, in

being alone with his burros and dog, and men said that already he was as crazy as old Hardrock Nelson, and others of that kind.

On the second morning, when Lannier's burros came in for water he fed them flapjacks; they knew by that sign that it was time to take up the packs again, to move on. He loaded Hungry Tom with the food and mining tools, filled the water-tins to be carried by Thirsty Lil and Thirsty Jane. Then he struck directly at the rise of the Panamints again, heading north and west into what even the old single-jack prospectors said was both Hell and the Devil's Paradise, and the home of the Shoshone Indians.

He drove on all that day, and another, and then a whole succession of days that were the same and endless, because time meant nothing to him. A land of burning hot rocks and sand, where there was no breath of wind, and no signs of life except the waterless ones of lizard and pack rat. Now and then, in the terrible silence of those majestic wastes, one of the burros would begin to sniff and look about; Lannier would let out a sharp shout and hurl a well-aimed rock before the animal could lie down with its load. Pat trotted along and chased lizards until the heat became too much, after which he waited until Hungry Tom passed close to an outcropping of rock. A sure leap carried the black and white mongrel to the top of Hungry Tom's back; there Pat would pant himself to coolness before getting up again and barking back at the plodding jennies, telling them to hurry it up.

This was an understood and accepted part in the lives of the five; sometimes Lannier would smile one of his rare smiles and call, "That's it, Pat. Make them hump it." Now and then, his ever-watching eyes saw something in an outcropping of rock that brought a brief halt—which meant respite for the patient burros—while Lannier used chip-hammer and magnifying glass. Then it was on again, straight as a homing-pigeon toward a distant goal.

ON AN AFTERNOON when time had marked so many long hot days behind, Pat, trotting along ahead, disappeared over the flat crest of a low ridge they were climbing. He reappeared almost at once, telling Lannier in no uncertain tones that there was somebody on the other side down near Dirty Springs. Shoshone Indians? Pat couldn't explain. Another prospector? Pat just said that somebody was over there, and went back, barking, to have another look.

Lannier reached the top and followed his burros down. A hundred or so yards below him, on the opposite side of the shallow gully, he saw the brush *ramada* with four men, lounging in the shade. Close-by gaped the familiar hole in the slope, with the dump of fresh dirt below it.

The burros increased pace and then stopped by the *ramada*, waiting patiently, secure in the knowledge that work was done for the day. Lannier nodded to the four bearded, beady-eyed loungers. He said, "Howdy, men; how is the water down below?"

"Plenty, mister," came the reply from the largest of them. "Or us'n's wouldn't be here."

Lannier turned and removed Thirsty Jane's pack, dumping the water-tins, one by one. Nobody spoke until he had done the same for Lil and then began to unburden Hungry Tom.

"I knowed it!" grunted one of the four in plain disgust. "I never seen it before, but I am now—right with my own eyes. Mister, you didn't look like the rest of these crazy, one-blanket jackass-prospectors at first, but you shore are." He said to the others, "They'll go thirsty, savin' every drop til they git close to more; then they pour it all out on the ground."

Lannier paid him no heed. Maybe some of the old one-blanket boys, like Hardrock Nelson, *did* dump their water because they were a bit looney or

considered it good luck. But one thing was certain: these four dirty looking men were *not* good prospectors. A good one would have understood; a good one would have been busy in that hole over there.

He watched the three burros trot down the trail to a spot of green down below and then stepped into the welcome shade, removing his hat and seating himself on Hungry Tom's pack. The four lay there with elbows propped beneath hairy heads until the largest, who apparently was the leader, scratched at his black beard and spoke. "Come fur?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Darwin," Lannier answered briefly. "Any luck?"

"Naw," snorted a young, buck-toothed man with scraggly blond hair around his mouth and narrow chin. "We ain't took out enough to throw a good night's drunk in any town in Californy *or* Nevada. Which way you headin'?"

"North," Lannier said.

He had never been a talkative man, except to Pat, and he cared to have less with these four, who looked like mining-camp bums. The big leader said, "Hell, man, that's Shoshone and Crazy Joe country. I wouldn't go any farther up that way if I knowed right where the old Looney's lost mine is. Them dam' Indians might've tamed down a leetle bit since they killed a lot of forty-niners twenty or so years ago; but I'll bet all them sixteen prospectors who've disappeared up there hunting that mine didn't all die of heat. Not fer me."

●

During supper, which Lannier prepared for himself and Pat, he learned that the leader's name was Thurand: the others were Abel, Messener, and Baker—or so they said. Death Valley was a haven for many men hiding safely behind a wall of heat, waterless lava, rock, and hellishly-white borax.

Let them think that he was as crazy as Hardrock and a hundred others of his kind.

Afterward, when Lannier had finished supper, and gone below with his pans to where a number of burros foraged in the sparse vegetation, he returned, lay on his back in comfort and talked briefly in answer to their questions.

Thurand finally said, "Them sharp eyes of yourn hev probably told you we're mostly down here tryin' to make some money, because we ain't exactly popular in certain towns. Ain't none of our business where you're goin'. But offhand, I'd bet my shirt you're headin' straight fer the Shoshone country to try where at least sixteen others like you didn't make it. You reckon there's anything to that curse old Crazy Joe put on that gold of his'n, as well as Death Valley itself?"

"No," Lannier answered.

"You're so much younger'n the old looney-heads, but there's no need fer me to ask if you know the story."

Lannier thought, *None at all, my shifty-eyed blackbeard. I'll find that fabulous lost mine with a curse on it, because I was born to find it. Yes, I know the story.*

IT CAME back to him, there in the dusk, while he lay with Pat's head nestling in one of his powerful hands. It came back because in ten long years of living alone within himself it had never been away.

1849 and twenty-seven white oxen wagons of the Sand-Walking Company, heading south from Salt Lake City to San Bernadino in California, thence to the riches of the gold fields. But somebody had heard of a short cut; it had lead them into what was to become Death Valley. Dead and dying of thirst, while the Shoshones—a small but warlike tribe—by turns attacked and then waited for heat and lack of water to do the rest.

With the ox-wagons, there had come

on foot a band of Jayhawkers—single men out for adventure and riches, finding death instead. All but one; a Mormon from Salt Lake, who had elected not to die but to go ahead on foot; toward the south, in the hopes of finding aid.

The Shoshones, circling like waiting wolves and carrying their water in reed baskets lined with pitch, came across human tracks so large that they stared and muttered in disbelief. No human being who ever lived could stand in it with both feet toe to heel. They followed the tracks of this monster, and came at last upon Joe Cruz-all making a brief, waterless evening meal. He straightened to his full height of six feet seven inches and then, ignoring them, bent to his fire again. One of the braver of the Shoshones leaped in and struck him over the head with a war-club.

When Joe came to, in a daze that never again left him, his great hands were tied behind his back and an Indian was riding his shoulders. In one pocket was a fist-sized lump of reddish brown rock, of which nearly one half was pure gold. In the years that followed, when the Shoshones were less warlike but still killed every prospector they could safely do so without fear of retribution, the real story of the giant finally came from the lips of young bucks drunk on liquor sold only to the squaws. They had ridden Crazy Joe like a horse and utilized his mighty strength for many purposes. Later, they allowed him to go back, by instinct, to the spot where his fabulous pocket of gold lay buried. Until the coming of the borax people, and those queer old white prospectors, they took him winters to Furnace Creek and lived in round houses built of tules. But the whites were there, now, and the Shoshones withdrew to new homes high in the great Funeral Mountains, where few men dared to come. It was there that Crazy Joe had died, his lips muttering a curse upon his gold—a curse upon the man who found it. The Indians believed it and had never gone back.

Lannier lay there on his back that evening with Pat's soft head in his hand and thought, *Yes, mister, I know all about it—and that's where I'm heading. I've no fear of the curse, nor of you who may have killed. I've no fear of anything, except too much contact with other men.*

He rolled over on his left side, facing them, and presently his breathing became regular with the rise and fall of his powerful lungs. His hand no longer held Pat's soft head; it lay at the edge of the pack.

"Well?" whispered Abel of the buck teeth. "Now's the time."

"You fool," Thurand whispered back. "If you was more of a mining-camp man and not mostly a tramp cow puncher you'd have recognized him."

"What's he supposed to be—some kind of a special beans?" Baker's voice in the darkness.

"*That's* Buford Lannier! Three strikes in the last five years, and he don't care enough about the stuff to spend it. That's the man they all said would go after Crazy Joe's lost mine some day—and find it! When he goes out of here tomorrow, we follow; when he finds the Crazy Joe we take it!"

2

LANNIER awoke the next morning, just at daybreak, in answer to Pat's wet tongue on his face. He rubbed Pat's head for a moment and they both yawned; then Lannier drew on his heavy-soled boots. The four others were asleep when he went down the path with one of the tins. Eight or ten burros were scat-

tered around and a coyote, hunting pack-rats, loped away. Pat promptly took off in brave pursuit that lasted all of fifty yards. He sniffed around in the rank-smelling brush a bit and loped back with an expression that said plainly, "Well, I certainly gave him the works, didn't I?"

Then he began to whine and trotted back to the brush again.

Lannier rose from beside the small pool formed of carefully-laid rocks and followed the dog. He found Pat at about the same time the odor came to his nostrils. He knelt on one knee and peered down.

There wasn't much left except bones and remnants of scattered clothing. That was about all. Hardrock Nelson had said back there "outside", "I tell ye, Buford, I really got it this time; right by Dirty Springs, too, by grab! I ain't read all the books on minin' like you hev, son, but after I made thet one mistake on iron pyrites I never hev again. Thet was a long time—"

"Of course, I'll grubstake you, Hardrock," Lannier had told the queer old man. "I'll help you select a really fine outfit, but make certain you don't talk; I'll be up that way in a few weeks and see what you've got."

"It's there and we're pardners. Jest a stringer now, son, but give me forty feet in an' twenty down..."

Lannier thought, *The old fellow either had a few drinks, and talked before leaving, or these vultures played a hunch and followed him in.* Lannier hadn't known, when he'd first arrived at the *ramada*, whether the four had killed Hardrock or stumbled upon his mine by chance. He wouldn't have at all been surprised had the eccentric old fellow, well grubstaked with the finest outfit he'd had in years, gone off in another direction, fired with ambition to make a really *great* strike. And now, Hardrock would prospect no more.

Pat had found the answer Lannier had hoped to find the evening before, when he feigned sleep with a hand near his gun. He hadn't slept until he heard them whispering about following him to Crazy Joe's lost mine.

Hardrock's bared neckbones, attached to the bullet-pierced skull, still carried the cheap chain and thumb-sized chunk of pyrite iron the old fellow had carried as a reminder of the mistake made by untold thousands of other gold-seekers. He put it into his pocket and returned to the water hole. Boots crunched on rock and Thurand, sleepy-eyed but suspicious, loomed up, awakened by Pat's brave yelps at the coyote. Lannier rose with the dripping tin.

He said, "I always travel early and I'll be on my way as soon as I eat and load up the jacks."

"We're quitting today," Thurand replied and squatted to slosh water into his black beard. "Headin' fer Nevady to work a new grubstake. But we'd sorta like to hev your opinion if our stringer is wuth comin' back to."

They went back up the trail together, and Lannier prepared his breakfast. Pat sat on his haunches, watched, and licked his chops. Lannier said, "Pat, go down and get Hungry Tom and the jennies, and tell them the flapjacks are ready."

Pat was off down the trail like a shot, and almost immediately his barks were interrupted by Hungry Tom's squeal of indignation and two lashing hind feet that always missed. The four men broke into laughter as the jack and two jennies began to plod toward the *ramada*.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Thurand.

THE FIRST tip of the sun was in view when Lannier, his burros

loaded, walked with the four to the dump and scrambled up to the entrance of Hardrock's tunnel. He bent over, crept along the narrow passage for twelve feet, and flared a match while he peered through the magnifying glass at the narrow vein.

Hardrock had been right about his strike; this was gold that would essay anywhere from one thousand a ton and up, and if Lannier's knowledge meant anything... He crept back to the outside, where four bearded men waited, saw the question in their eyes and shook his head.

He said, "Tough luck, men. Pyrite."

"Why, that dirty old—" began Abel and then clamped his hairy lips tight.

"You're not the first ones to be fooled," Lannier said to Thurand the leader. "There were a thousand others before you, and there will be more as long as men seek gold. Ten years ago, it fooled one of the best single-blanket men of them all. Men laughed for years at old Hardrock Nelson."

He left them there shooting strange glances at one another and went down to his burros and called out sharply, "Tom, get going; move out!"

Hungry Tom moved out and was followed by the two jennies, their big water-loads swaying. Pat went yelping off after the first lizard, as they moved down a long dry wash. A mile farther on the rocks of Panamint Range swallowed them into its already-warm, dry maw. The sun rose higher; heat-waves began to shimmer from the rocks and by mid-morning Pat tired of his lizard chasing sport. He mounted a rock and waited. Hungry Tom swung over by it instinctively, as though saying, All right, you smart-aleck little moocher, I'm strong and can carry you. They moved on while Pat rested and then got to his feet and began to bark back a hurry up to the two jennies.

Lannier said, "No need for hurry, Pat; it's not the first time we've been followed. I sized up their water-bags, and when I see how many burros they're bringing, we'll know about how long their water will last."

●

He found the answer late that afternoon when, far, far away below in the haze he counted an even twelve black dots with four others walking along the string.

He said, "They brought their nine burros and old Hardrock's three, Pat; figuring on taking out every round possible on their first trip."

●

He let them follow for three straight days, knowing they believed that where he went there would be water ahead. Late afternoon on the third day, Lannier camped at the head of a small rocky draw, unpacked, and watered his three burros, sparingly. He took three notched sticks from the pack and, with Pat trotting along, went up beneath a ledge to where several mounds of twigs showed the dwelling place of a number of pack rats. While Pat sniffed around eagerly, Lannier tilted a flat stone and placed the sticks beneath the upper edge into a figure-four trigger, baited with a piece of bacon.

"Come on, Pat," he told the sniffing mongrel; "I'll have your supper in a few minutes."

Ten minutes later the heavy stone fell with a thud. Lannier removed three big rats, skinned them, gave two to Pat, saved another for the dog's mid-day meal the next day, and came back with an armful of dry nest twigs for his fire.

Later, when supper was over, he left the burros browsing at vegetation only a burro could subsist on, and climbed the slope to the ridge above. Here he piled up small stones into a ridge that formed an arrow, half-covered them with dirt, then soaked the whole with water while Pat sat by cocking an inquisitive head from side to side.

"A little dirt sprinkled on in the

morning will look like an old marker, covered with dirt from drift-winds, Pat," Lannier explained. "They'll reach here about noon—when it's good and hot."

HIS ESTIMATION proved to have been made with deadly precision. The sun, pouring down from straight overhead, had made a hellish furnace of the long draw, when four panting men—gasping and straining among burros thirsty, but not suffering—came to the remains of the campfire.

"Hold up, boys!" shouted Thurand hoarsely and waved. "Here's his camp from last night."

They stood there, licked at their lips, and looked about and then up the slope, where led the tracks of three burros and a pair of heavy-soled boots. The buck-toothed Abel was the first to weaken. "Goddlemighty, Blackie," he said, swallowing. "We're in a spot; I'm fer cuttin' water-rations still more an' goin' back to Dirty Springs."

"Same here," put in Baker uneasily, a squat, sullen eyed man older than the others; perhaps thirty-five.

Thurand sneered at them all. "Cow-punchers! Saddle-bums with nothing but a tail-bone to ride on. You wanted to hunt gold. Well, I brought you—"

"You brought us because you were afraid Nevada officers might get word down to Darwin," cut in Messener quietly. He was evidently the most intelligent of the four. "But this is no time for wrangling. You're the desert man, Thurand; what do you think?"

"We go on," came the harsh reply. "Ordinarily, I'd turn back for days of burning thirst to git to Dirty Springs. But where Lannier goes, there's water—water and gold! This time, more gold than a wagon-train could haul out. Do what you like, but I'm going after it."

He began to climb to the crest above, without looking back because he knew they would follow. He came out on top, and then a hoarse yell broke from his bearded lips. *"Come up here, you fellers!"*

Again the four of them stood in a panting group looking at something on the ground. Gone now was thirst and fear; gone any thought of turning back.

"An old rock marker-arrow!" Abel almost whispered the words in reverence.

"Probably made by Lannier three or four years ago, or maybe before that," diagnosed Thurand, the desert-man. "Hell, that sharp devil has known for *years* where Crazy Joe's lost mine is. Come on, boys," he shouted suddenly. "We're rich!"

3

ALL THAT day and the next, Lannier was an elusive shadow without substance, somewhere out there ahead in the maze of barren hills, gullies, and dry-washes. Just four sets of tracks that went on and on and...on, endlessly, while four cursing men turning hollow-eyed now panting after him.

"Tracks!" Abel screamed that second afternoon. "Just tracks and them damned arrers—but no water!" He began to scream, senselessly; then he turned and broke into a run back along the way they had come, the dry canteen, from which his day's supply of water already was gone, banging against his bony shoulder.

Thurand stepped to his pack burro and jerked free a .44-.40 caliber repeating-rifle. He snapped it to his shoulder and took quick, cool aim; the weapon crashed once and Abel's angular body fell sprawling. Thurand levered out the shell and slid the weapon back into the pack.

"Go get his canteen," he told Baker coolly; "we might need it."

"Hell of a lot of good it'll do us," Messener said bitterly.

"Lannier is up ahead—not too far now, judging from his tracks. He's about out of water, too, by now; he wouldn't be going on unless he knew where there's a hole."

Lannier was indeed up ahead—within ear-range of the sound of Thurand's fatal rifle. He hadn't found any waterhole, and there wasn't one within many more miles. But most of his tins were still full—enough so that he came back that night alone, leaving Pat in camp, walking slowly because of the weight of five gallons of the precious fluid in each hand. The twelve thirsty burros were in a small group, side-line hobbled and uninterested in foraging. He watered each of them from a collapsible canvas bucket hung from his neck and left the two tins in plain sight close by, stacking one on top of the other.

On top of this he placed a cheap chain, to which was fastened a thumb-sized chunk of fool's gold. He thought grimly that old Hardrock would have liked that.

It took no great stretch of the imagination to picture the scene that would take place the next morning. The screaming curses and roaring oaths at sight of the tins, his own tracks, and that chain that had been around old Hardrock's neck. They probably had seen it in Darwin, and laughed at the story back of it while they got the old fellow drunk.

●

The next day passed without event, and still the next. Lannier knew that all of their water must be gone, by now, and that they were thirst-crazy. He crossed a dry-wash, where withered berry-bushes with a full ripe crop stood in the late afternoon sun, but did not pause for the succulent delicacy.

He knew they would camp there, but he wasn't prepared for the sudden burst of gunfire. Maybe they were shooting their burros in a rage—but he had to know. He said to Pat, "Let them lie down and stay here until I get back."

Lannier had never carried a rifle, because of the extra weight—unless he knew he was to be followed. He had none, now—nothing but a pistol. He went back at a trot, and came to the wash of the berry-bushes, just as a woman broke into view at a run and fled away past him. He came to the wash and saw both tragedy and yelling joy two hundred yards away.

The tragedy was evident in nearly a dozen bodies of women and older children, sprawled about in grotesque heaps, shot down in a wild flurry of gunfire. The joy was in three men burying their bearded faces deep into three of a dozen reed baskets lined with pitch, sucking in great gulps of tepid water.

LANNIER rose to his feet and turned away; an apprehension, entirely strange to his keen mind, shot through him for the first time in his life. Thurand and the other two had water now with which to fill their bags and supply a couple of burros; they had rifles against his six-shooter. He went back at a trot and picked up a stick on the way. "Pat, get them up! Get them up, Pat!" he shouted.

Pat made a dive at Hungry Tom's black haunches and bit—but not too hard. Hungry Tom swung his head and long ears angrily, and an equally-angry snort came from him. Pat barked and snapped at him again as Lannier came trotting up and laid on with the light stick. Something like a

resigned grunt came from three burros, and with it they struggled upright. Lannier began to beat them into a trot under the lightened packs, in the direction which the Indian woman had taken. He followed her tracks for two miles until he realized that dusk was not too far away. He had to get to her, because there wasn't a waterhole within fifty miles the direction she was going: her reed basket was back there with the others.

He jerked off packs in a low wash, where her tracks had crossed; with canteen and pistol set off in long strides, walking and trotting by turns. Here was where he needed his great strength, for he knew the endurance of these people up in this Funeral Range country, whence they had fled, and where few white men dared to come.

He covered a mile and then another. It was almost sundown, now, and hope in him was dying momentarily. He'd have to go back and pick up her tracks again on the morrow. At that moment, however, he rounded a cluster of rocks—and there she stood. Waiting. Facing him and waiting. Resignedly.

Her hair was done up on each side of her head in a cord wrapped "chongo" with bangs in front. Over her shoulders and full firm breasts was a short jacket of reeds. A short reed skirt with slits in the sides displayed half the length of her long, lithe legs above moccasins of coyote skin. She stood a full five feet nine inches tall—and she had the bluest pair of eyes Lannier had ever seen. He was for a moment too stunned to speak. He came to a stop and stared at the beauty of her, at the steady blue eyes. Then he took off his hat. "I have reason to believe that you speak English," he said.

"Yes," she answered. "I've wanted to talk with you many times these last five years."

"With me?" he asked in surprise, if more was possible.

She nodded, the timidness of the wild leaving her tense now. "Many times. When you came through, sometimes from the south or the east or the west and buried water cans, I would not let the others touch. Sometimes I dug up the old ones and refilled them to make certain they would not be dry when you came and needed them. You're hunting Crazy Joe's gold with the curse upon it."

He said, "Yes, and you're Crazy Joe's daughter by an Indian mother; he's been dead a long time, hasn't he?"

"Ten summers now he is dead," she nodded.

"You'd better come back to camp with me," he told her. "Your friends are dead; I was trying to find you before they could track you down and make you lead them to water."

He saw her smile then, faintly, and was aware of the timidness of the wild people, still inherent. "I ran until I saw you were not bearded; then I waited when I saw the man who had brought the water cans and hidden them. My name is Mary Gruzall. I am in need of water from the running."

He unslung the canteen, unscrewed the cap, and handed both to her. She drank sparingly, tried unsuccessfully to push on the cap, and then looked at him helplessly. Apparently she had never before seen one.

"Like this, Mary," he told her and replaced the cap. "And my name is Lannier; we'd better go."

SHE FELL in beside him, quite confident now, and matched him stride for stride as they returned to the burros. Pat came, yelping a greeting, then suddenly shied off, his tail half-lowered and the hackles rising along his back. At Lannier's call, he came in, whining, to be petted on the head but his eyes were on the woman. This was a new experience for Pat.

"Tell me about your father," Lannier said, while the low fire, well-hidden behind a cluster of rocks, was cooking their supper.

She used her slim brown hands to

adjust the reed shirt and stroked Pat's head. "He was from a land far to the north, where the Shoshones have never been. There is a lake with much salt in it."

He told her the name, and what was known to the outside world about Joe Gruzall. She nodded now and then, but often shook her head.

"It is true the Shoshones rode him like a horse but they never beat him; they were afraid of his great strength. Then, after a few months one of the girls wanted him, and then there was no more work for him. He went off alone and was gone for nearly two summers to dig this gold that the white people crave; when he came back I was there."

"Did he bring it with him?" Lannier asked.

Again she shook her head. "He left it and came back and said that God had cursed him. Sometimes, when his head did not hurt, he would tell me of the lake of salt far to the north and how he would take the gold and go there. Then his head would hurt again and he would curse it."

"And he never told you where it was?"

"He said that gold is a curse on all men and told the Shoshones to kill all who came seeking it. There have been many," she added simply.

He removed the warm bean-pot from the fire and placed the coffee-pot at the edge. He had made biscuits for supper, pouring water and salt and baking powder into the top of the flour sack and mixing until it became a dough ball to be fried.

He asked gently, "Would you like for me to hunt that gold, for you?"

She shook her head. Nor would she discuss the matter any more that night, something that puzzled Buford Lannier very much. Her father had put a curse on the gold and told the Shoshones to kill any white prospector who came looking for it. Yet, over a period of five years, they had watched Lannier while he began at the death site and, carrying water to bury deep in sealed tins, traced out the route Crazy Joe would have taken on his way toward the lower country to get help. They had watched when he came in from the opposite side, still carrying more water, and after talking with William Manley, one of the few survivors.

Manley, who later wrote a history of the tragedy, *Death Valley in '49*, had gone over his own maps and helped Lannier trace out the route mighty Joe Gruzall had said that he was taking. Manley had gotten through; Gruzall had caught a war-club at the back of his head.

He'd said, "They probably got him within two days, because the Shoshones—except on a few trips to San Bernardino and San Gabriel, to steal horses for meat—rarely went far. I hope this helps you, Lannier. Maybe if I was younger I'd have a try at it with you. But I'll take the comfort of my home and the shade of my fruit groves."

Lannier and Joe Gruzall's daughter finished supper that night. He cleaned the dishes and pans with dry sand, and wiped them while the girl sat on a blanket with Pat beside her. He said, "There is nothing I can do about those who were killed, Mary. Thurand and his men have water, now, and I've got to start all over again—unless I can lead them to some of the Shoshones."

She shook the vertical, cord wrapped "chongos" on each side of her head. "They are far away, toward where you were going. My father used to bring me here each summer; this year, some of the widows came with me to the spring, which is two hours walk from where the men with beards found us."

That explained the reed baskets filled with water, and posed the problem that if Thurand's burros were not side-line hobbled they'd go straight to it.

He could see her plainly in the

darkness, sitting beside Pat; with a stick she was making marks in the sand. He said, "Mary, if you don't want your father's gold with the curse upon it, you would not care if I try to find it?"

"No."

"Do you believe that the curse will fall upon me?"

Even in the darkness he saw the level-eyed look she gave him. "Yes," she answered. "I believe it very much, Buford Lannier."

4

MID-MORNING of the next day found them miles away, and it found Thurand, Messner, and Baker with water carried on three of the best burros. The other nine had been left behind—and promptly had disappeared, heading straight for the Indian spring Crazy Joe's daughter had spoken of.

Again bearded men came upon just another of so many of Lannier's camps, but this time something was different. The moccasin-tracks of a woman were plainly visible and, drawn in the sand with a stick, as though in an idle moment, were the words *Mary Gruzall.*

"Hell's fire!" Thurand cried out hoarsely to the others, pointing. "That name! That woman who got away! She's *Crazy Joe's daughter!* Come on, boys; she's taking him straight to Crazy Joe's lost mine."

And thus the grim game began all over again for Lannier, fighting for more days of time, now, out there in the burning wastes of the hills and gullies and dry-washes. Nothing but luck, in the person of those unfortunate summer-wanderers, had prevented Lannier from wreaking terrible retribution upon the heads of those who had murdered Hardrock Nelson, and who now sought to do the same to Lannier once he had found the lost mine.

He began to swing, in a long circle more than one hundred miles, around the very small dot on his big map—toward which he originally had been heading until events took a sudden new turn. Now it was a matter of going on and on, with extra water needed for the woman who walked with him. Not once did she tire or complain. The reed shirt that covered her shoulders and breasts had a large hood behind, with a stick in a socket to hold it upright, over her head. From all Crazy Joe had taught her during those first ten years, when he had been alive, she cooked better than Lannier and added seeds from plants he had known were edible.

She puzzled him, in more ways than the fact that she had known of him for five years and helped him. Why? She had refused to answer. He got the impression, when he swung away from his destined course, that she was relieved. Many times, around the fire of evenings, he caught the strange blue eyes watching him, and it brought him discomfort. Unused to the company of women, her long, lithe, brown-skinned body lying on a blanket was beginning to disturb him.

He found out a few more things about her—little things she let slip, inadvertently. Crazy Joe had taught her how to write a little by using a stick in sand. He had told her of his people, the Mormons, and of their long trek westward to find a land of their own; of the big house they had built and of the bigger one they had planned. Sometimes, when his mind was lucid for short periods, he'd said they would take his gold and give it to them to help build the big house.

These things Lannier learned about her by night, while by day they followed the plodding burros with Lannier looking back—always back, to

where now and then six black dots could be seen far, far in the distance.

●

"I'M BEGINNING to get worried, Mary," he told her one night, while they were camped in the bed of a flat dry-wash. "Not that I haven't been all along. But yesterday, when we dug up the water that I put there last year, you said to leave the hole open and the cans in sight. Now they know the secret; they know what I intended for them ever since I left the chain on top of the tins when I watered their burros. So they'll come now to the one supply they know of in the Funeral Range. To us. It's no longer a trailing job, Mary; it's pursuit, and they've got rifles. I'm heading straight for the Shoshone country and the place where I think I'll find your father's gold."

She sat on a blanket with one long bare leg outstretched and the other drawn up with Pat, the canine apostate, beside her. She had begun to laugh much at the way Pat stole rides off Hungry Tom's back. She said, "The Shoshones have always been a little afraid of me because my father was a crazy man. It's why I never had a husband among them. Fear and superstition. And it's also why they never sent me out to the Mormon people. Fear that I'd lead back the whites and take their country as it was taken down at Furnace Creek. It's why any member of them who ever told of my existence, drunk or sober, would have been killed by torture."

"I thought so!" he said triumphantly. "So you do know where it is?"

She said simply, "Yes."

"But you won't take me there."

She shook her head. "No, Buford Lannier, I won't take you there."

"But you'll go with me if I go?"

"I can do nothing else—at the moment."

He rose to his feet and said gruffly, "Get some sleep. We're leaving at midnight."

●

They left in the dim light of a fading moon, and when dawn came the wisdom of Lannier's uncanny instinct was visible out there in the distance; black dots no larger than pin-points, but dots that moved. It was a race, now, and Lannier spared neither the animals, the woman, nor himself as he left a plain trail straight for the spot marked on his map. By nightfall, the burros were worn out and so were the others. But as long as there was light from a fading quarter-moon, Lannier never ceased his grim effort to lengthen the distance between himself and those dry-throated, cursing, straining men behind him.

On the following day, he came out on top of a high promontory, halted his tired burros, and let them lie down. Something had come over the daughter of Crazy Joe since yesterday; something akin to a kind of inner fear that was displayed in her face. She was watching him all the time, now, with that something new in those light eyes; three times he had deliberately changed course, to make sure of what he was certain of now.

He was using the apprehension and then the relief and then the fear again in her eyes to navigate him to Crazy Joe's mine. And that course had led straight to the dot on the big piece of paper he now held spread out in his hand.

"It's no use, Mary," he told her as they stood there and felt a faint, hot breeze strike at their faces. "It's taken five years of preparation for this moment, and I can't be turned back now."

HE TOOK a compass from his pocket and held it level in his hand, studying the position of the pointer. It disappeared again, and he pointed to where far, far away heat-blasts wrapped Death Valley in their man-killing waves.

"We're standing in a bee-line from where your father left the wagons one evening. He walked all that night, and until late the next afternoon, when the Shoshones tracked him down and clubbed him. About twenty-six hours. He could walk four miles an hour on level ground. Allowing for rests, and climbing over rough terrain, he averaged two miles an hour, or fifty-two miles. We're fifty miles or so from where he left and we're on a *bee line where Manley went out on the other side!*"

He folded the map, bent and slipped it into the open leather case strapped to Hungry Tom's pack. He walked over and took her shoulders in his hands, the first time he had ever touched her.

"Mary, your father's fabulous pocket of gold is within four miles, or perhaps much less, of where we're standing. I think he came up that long sloping arroyo below us. I've found the water five miles from here that he must have used for supply while he worked at his gold, and you know where it is. Take one of the jennies, and half the food, and go; I'm going to lead them away and fight it out in the darkness against their rifles."

Without waiting to see more of what lay in her face, he dropped his hands and went to Hungry Tom's pack, yanking at it furiously. Down below, in the terrible heat, six black objects were plainly visible, working their way along the back of a low ridge of lava rock. They were coming hard, beating their burros and cursing—as only thirsty, desperate, gold-mad men curse. Something in their mien indicated that they knew Lannier had at last reached the end of the long torturous journey that had begun, for them, at Dirty Springs.

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DOUBLE • ACTION WESTERN

Lannier made Hungry Tom get to his feet, while he yanked at the pack ropes and began dumping supplies into Mary's blanket. She spoke not a word as he rolled and then tied it on top of Thirsty Jane's water pack. Thurand and his men were a mile below, now, and coming hard as was possible, their savage shouts and curses at the burros plain to Lannier and the woman who stood beside him.

He finished and handed her the lead rope. "Get out of here fast; if Jane won't lead, then drive her hard. I'll take the other direction to pull them off."

She went without a word, down the rocky declivity to the floor of the mile long arroyo itself. She looked back once; then the jenny began to balk and she took time—precious time—to stop and tie the rope around Thirsty Jane's neck. Something seemed to be wrong with the pack and she began to work at the ropes.

"Go on, go on!" he roared down at her. "Get behind her and let the pack fall. Hurry!"

"The pack is slipping," she called up; "it's about to fall off."

His big boots struck hard down the slope as he went down after her, the rocks rolling and crackling. She was still at the ropes when he came up beside her. She turned and said, "It's all right now; the water is over there where you said it was. And then what will I do?"

"I don't know," he answered, and gave Jane a hard blow on the rump with his hand. "Just go."

HE WHEELED and began a hard scramble back up to the top; again the rocks rolled from beneath his boots, as though in some diabolical scheme to impede his progress. His breath began to come in great gasps, his big chest heaving when he came out on top again and saw them. Not more than a quarter of a mile away.

A hoarse yell broke from them and there came the spang of a long-range single-shot rifle. The big slug droned over Lannier's head, and he got the two remaining burros into motion, quartering down the declivity almost in the opposite direction as a black and white streak shot away. Pat the apostate, was following the girl.

He reached the floor of the great arroyo and looked up the long slope of it to where she was urging the jenny in the opposite direction. On the rim, Thurand and his men stood with red-rimmed eyes and rifles in their hands. The rifles began to spang, and the slugs from one of them—that long-range single-shot—began to kick up dust around Lannier and his two trotting burros.

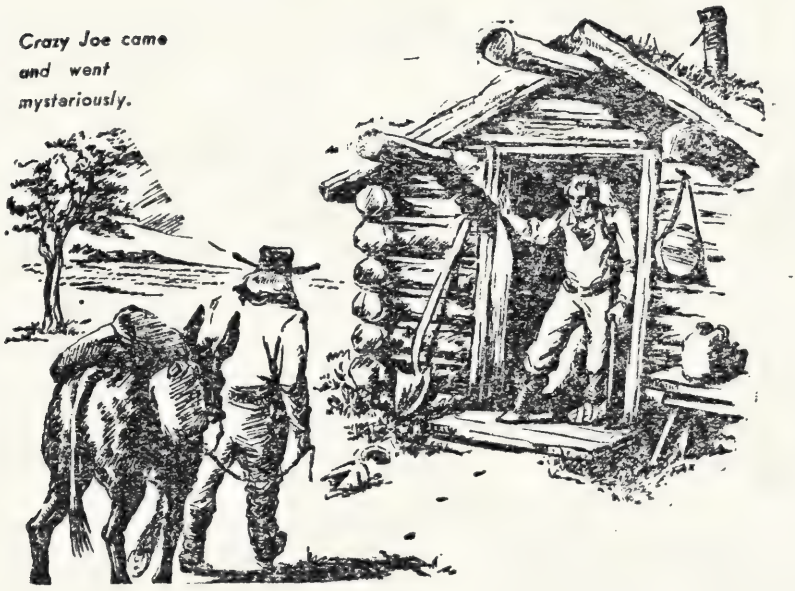
Then the fire ceased as suddenly as it had begun and when he turned he understood why. Mary Gruzall stood far below, waving at the men on the rim. He heard her clear voice, as though it were no more than a hundred yards away. "Follow me," she was calling up. "Follow me and I'll take you to Crazy Joe's gold."

Thurand's ringing cry, calling her by name, came back in answer; then three burros, and three bearded men, were pouring down the slope after the girl and the trotting burro. Lannier stood there, momentarily petrified at what she had done. He had no illusions as to what would happen to her once they had that water, the mine...and the girl.

A rare curse broke from him as he wheeled the two burros and started after them all.

THEY WERE strung out, all of them in that long arroyo that made a perfect funnel for the throat-searing heat sweeping down through it; the girl and the trotting jenny up ahead; Thurand and his men, their burros with empty water-sacks now abandoned, in the center and running; Lannier helplessly far in the rear.

Messener, he of the long-range rifle, was the first to drop it while he ran on and gasped hot air into his



Crazy Joe came and went mysteriously.

cracked mouth. Thurand in the lead seemed tireless. It was Baker, the squat and the older, who could not go on; he was trotting on his short legs, and his bearded head had begun to make queer little jerking motions back and forth, rolling freely upon his neck and shoulders. Just the whites of his eyes were showing now.

Baker didn't know it but he was dying of heat prostration.

He took a few more stumbling steps before his legs gave way. Then he fell headlong, and luckily there was a stone that met his forehead squarely with an audible *thock*.

Baker, within sight of his goal, had lost.

Messener was holding up better, his breath coming in great sobbing gulps. His eyes were riveted on the bobbing pack carried by the jenny with a fleet-footed girl running alongside.

"Blackie," he half gasped, half cried out to the big man ahead. "Black, for gawd's sake...*shoot that...burro!*"

The thought of it, apparently, had occured to Thurand, now—for the first time. He staggered to a halt, raised the rifle and felt the hot barrel burn his hand. Those two figures up there ahead were dancing crazily from side to side in the shimmering heat-waves and he fired four times. Nothing happened; with a hoarse cry he lined the sights, and fired his last shot at the bobbing rump of a burro disappearing into a side arroyo. They slowed down, now, and Thurand, throwing his useless rifle aside, began to stride on. He and Messener came to the place where the girl had disappeared, and what they saw brought forth a hoarse yell from Messener.

Up there ahead was a brush *ramada;* beside it, a hole gaped in the steep side of the gully. They broke into a trot again, came up and stood panting and red-eyed.

It was all there. The mine, the

rock-lined *arrastra* of a kind brought to Mexico by the *Conquistadores* and pushed, not by an animal, but by Crazy Joe himself to drag the rocks over his ore and crush it; the fire-blackened pots half-covered by pack-rat nests; everything they had pictured. They and untold hundreds of others.

It was all there, in a lightning glance, and it held little interest for them now. Their red-rimmed eyes were upon a panting jenny that stood forty feet away, facing them with ears pointed—upon four empty water-cans that from big holes had gurgled the last of their contents out to be sucked up by the thirsty sand.

On the ground beside the tins lay a rusty pick; above, a lithe-legged figure in moccasins was fleeing over the lip of the ridge.

They stood there, unable to speak, even to curse, both realizing the terrible price they must pay for the killing of Hardrock Nelson.

Messener, he more intelligent than the one other of them, now left, walked over and kicked at the tins as the jenny trotted away. There was no use to kill her. Even in cutting her jugular he couldn't get down blood that would only prolong a little longer what was coming.

He walked over and looked with a strange, calm curiosity at the *arrastra*. He fitted himself against the push-bar and began to walk a slow circle around the circular rock-lined pit, dragging those huge stones around the bottom. He stopped and wiped at his face where there was no sweat now.

"You know, Blackie," he said. "I can understand, now, why those Shoshones rode old Crazy Joe like a horse. It must have taken a man of superhuman strength to push this thing day after day, to grind up that ore."

Thurand had gone beneath the *ramada* of brush and from a dirt shelf three feet wide and ten feet long dug into the bank, picked up a chunk of pure gold larger than his thumb and stared at it. There was more of it, much more, piled along the shelf. "Not too much," he said; "take a look at this."

Messener glanced at it carelessly and wiped at his face again. He tried to swallow but felt only the membranes stick together. He said, "I wonder if this was just a pocket, like some said, or a regular vein. I think I'll go in and see."

He disappeared into the maw of the tunnel and the sound of his boots came crunchingly. The sound of his pistol was much louder when it came a few minutes later.

Thurand stood there for a few moments with the metal in his hands and then tossed it back with the rest. He took off his hat and wiped at his hairy face and sat down. *Funny,* he thought, *but his stuff looks exactly like that chunk old Hardrock Nelson showed us in Darwin the night we got him drunk.*

THE STARS came out that night and, after a while, Lannier got up and went to the waterhole to have a look at the six burros. He felt a strange restlessness, despite the fact that he was tired—really tired—for one of the few times in his life. He went back to the glowing coals that was the fire and sat down. A few feet away a pair of eyes watched him while she stroked the head of the adoring Pat. They had spoken hardly a word since afternoon. Lannier finally stirred to his feet again and went over to sit beside her.

It was she who finally broke the long silence between them. "And now, Buford Lannier, what do you do?"

He looked at her and smiled faintly. "I don't know now, Mary Gruzall. I

feel like a man who has climbed a flight of stairs to a door and found that it's only in a single wall with nothing beyond. Kind of like hunting two years for a mining claim, selling it, and then walking down the street feeling a strange emptiness. I would have easily found your father's mine if you hadn't led them to it. And now, do you still believe in that curse?"

She said in a low voice, "Yes. Very much."

"But why, Mary? Why?" he demanded.

"Because," came the answer softly, "I'm the curse that came with it."

He stared at her in the dim light of the fire. She was looking out into the night. She said, "I have known for five years that you were hunting it and that someday it would be you who found it. And I knew that when you did, you'd find with it...an Indian woman."

Pat, stretched out between them in comfort, struggled erect in canine astonishment and then managed, somehow, to squeeze his way out of the vise. He couldn't figure out what they were doing with their faces together that way. But Mary looked up into Lannier's own face with a new awe and wonder at having been kissed by a man not her father of many years ago. She heard Lannier's voice, his lips close.

"Later I'll go back and develop Hardrock's prospect. It might be a trickle or a strike that will bring up a rough town. Whatever it is, I'll still go on hunting for gold. It's a lonely life, Mary."

"For an Indian woman?"

"For Mormon Joe Gruzall's daughter. I'm taking you to show you the big building. You see, Mary, I came from there, too."

That face-to-face business was going on again and Pat, thoroughly disgusted now, went over, lay down, and began to lick his paws.

★

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REAL WESTERN STORIES

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Here was Selena, her entire manner oozing deathless love — but why had she framed Brinson into this hoosegow?

Dangerous Widow

Feature Novel of Wits and Guns

It seemed too good to be true, Brinson's happening upon this lovely widow, and capturing her heart almost at the same moment. In fact, it wasn't true—as Brinson discovered when he landed in jail, spotted as the notorious Concho Jake. And, when Selena came to visit him, still feigning true love...

By Hamlin Daly

ONCE THE widow made sure that Brinson was not one of the trailhands who crowded Red Fork, hooting and rioting until it was time to return to their home-spreads, she settled down to arrange for his future. Despite his balking at first, Selena Selby ended by making the prospect so alluring that Brinson could hardly wait until it was time to follow her to Ojo Grande, where he was to ramrod the Diamond S. The outfit was going plumb to hell for lack of a man to run it.

Brinson was tall, solid, and without any tallow to round him out, though he was anything but peaked-looking. While there was nothing shrewd about his expression, he had the appearance of knowing that two and two always equalled four. Yet, this was to a degree offset by the open-faced look of one who was still busy seeing the world, and still impressed by what he saw.

Now that Selena had taken the stage for Ojo Grande, he was all in a lather to get acquainted with the new job. Manfully, he counted the hours, and stayed plumb sober; he set out before dawn of the appointed day. Instead of following the stage road, he took an old track that wound through mountains so barren that a coyote couldn't cross without a chuck-wagon. He was going out of his way, by quite a few miles, to handle a chore for Selena.

There was a mining-prospect which after fine promise, had apparently petered out. Selena wanted Brinson to sneak up and to see if anyone was working it on the sly; she figured

that maybe it had not petered out, and that she was being swindled.

Brinson was a long way from home, by nearly the full width of Texas, plus half of Arizona; and what gave him a fine glow as he rode was that the job had come looking for him. Though Selena was a luscious armful, with a soft voice and a fine head of hair—palomino-colored, except with a bit more red in it—it had taken considerable patience and persuasion, a couple of buggy rides by moonlight, and the assurance that she lived in town, and not on the Diamond S, to persuade Brinson to work for a woman.

There was no law against riding to town of an evening. He could picture the cozy little cottage which she had so lovingly described. She had spent hour after thrilling hour, baiting him with its charms, from honeysuckle-veiled front porch, to kitchen. He could ride right into Ojo Grande and find the house without asking a solitary question of anyone.

Anticipation shortened his passage along the shoulder of that barren range. Far off, just short of the haze-blocked horizon, where the mountains swung west, he noted the dead blackness of lava beds. On the lower slopes, and much nearer, half a dozen burros browsed in the dry brush. No other hoofed critter could have found anything to hone his teeth on. Brinson wondered if those midget-sized jackasses meant that prospectors actually were on the prowl.

A landmark—an abandoned settlement, all tumbled down—made it easy for him to locate the canyon that Selena wanted him to look over. Not far from the steep trail leading down to its bottom, he noted a few prospect-holes; there were also diggings into the face of the wall, though none went farther than a bare start. This, however, was enough to assure him that he was not in the wrong pew; so instead of riding downgrade to find the tunnel Selena had described, he made for the nearby spring.

NOT FAR from the pint-sized pool was a cabin that still hung together well enough to offer shelter. A few tin cans lay about. These were old and rusty. "Hot enough down here for a claim jumper to be barbecued on the hoof," Brinson grumbled, then he glanced up, and noted that the sun was already cut off by the rim-rock.

After drinking enough to cut the dust from his throat, he would have mounted up to carry on with his investigation, had not the crunch of hoofs made him pause. A tall, wide-shouldered, lantern-jawed stranger, riding a long-legged bay, hove into sight. His outfit was loaded down with silver conchas. It wasn't fiesta trumpery by any means; it had been weathered by use, and so had the wearer. He was built pretty much like Brinson except around the face, which was older, narrower, and had a more purposeful expression.

From the looks of him, he had not ridden far that day. This set Brinson wondering if he could be one of the *hombres* Selena was fretting about. That he didn't appear to be a prospector was no proof that he wasn't a trouble-maker.

"Howdy!" The man's amiable gesture fitted with the good-natured look that came over his face when he spoke. Then, dismounting, "Reckon there's room for another?"

"Help yourself, stranger." Brinson mustered all the show of friendliness that he could, in view of his suspicions. "Spring seems to be filling up fast enough, though I sure hogged what water there was."

"Name's Smith," the newcomer went on. "Shorty Smith, they call me."

"I'm Josh Brinson. Passing through, and missed the way. Where's the trail up yonder lead to?"

"Depends where you're aiming to go."

"Told me in Red Fork it was a shortcut to Amesburg."

Shorty, who was sufficiently over six feet tall to stand eye-to-eye with

Brinson, chuckled sympathetically. "Must've took the wrong fork. Always get snarled up with shortcuts. Seen any Rafter AB strays on your way?"

"Nary a critter."

Had he spoken his mind, he would have added, *Unless they'd et loco weed, they'd had sense enough not to drift this way.* A man looking for strays anywhere within miles of this spot was downright unconvincing. And then and there, Brinson resolved to find out whether Smith was alone, or had partners somewhere down the canyon.

Brinson had a quart of whiskey in his pack, and saw good and immediate use for it. "No sense riding on," he said. "Last two springs back yonder are dried up. I've got bacon and flapjack flour, and some liquor to wash it down with."

"That's pure luxury; I've got a can of tomatoes and some jerky."

•

After they had unsaddled their horses, Brinson suggested, "No use busting up any of this shack for a fire—I'll hustle up some brush, whilst you butcher that can of tomatoes."

He came back with an armful of fuel. On the way, he had located the tunnel he was to investigate. He aimed to get a good look after supper, when whiskey had Smith sleeping soundly.

By the time the meal was disposed of, and darkness had fallen, Shorty Smith had tapped the bottle enough to be in a mellow mood. He produced a deck of cards.

Brinson shook his head. "Ain't enough of us—not unless we get a couple coyotes to take hands."

If Shorty did have any partners further down the canyon, his drinking did not make him careless enough to suggest the possibility of finding someone to sit in. "Tell you what," Brinson proposed, seeing that his objection had not baited the man, "I got a deck, too, so we can bet to see who beats the Chinaman."

"Hell, we can deal out four poker hands," Shorty proposed. "Each play his own and one extra; that'll keep the cards running."

BRINSON'S stack promised not to last long. Far as he could see by firelight, Shorty dealt them straight. Presently the stranger said, "This sure as hell looks bad for me; let's have your deck."

Brinson kept on losing until, just about whittled down, his luck turned. Before long, Shorty got out a poke of gold; he lost that, and a second one that he dug up.

Pulling a long face, Shorty said, "Bet my outfit against yours—horse and gear, boots and all."

"That'd leave one of us in a pickle! I'll stake you to half of what I won."

"Borrowing from the winner ain't right," Shorty protested. He took a long pull at the bottle, killing it except for a dollop left for Brinson. "Can't feel ill-natured about losing to a man that brung whiskey into the wilderness. Only, what I lost ain't mine. I got this outfit when I was on the winning end." As he spoke, he peeled out of his embroidered vest. He pulled off the boots with the fancy stitching, and shucked the gunbelt—which, like the holsters, was cluttered with silverwork. "I'll sell it to you, the whole lot. You give me your outfit, horse, and clothes."

Brinson forked over the pokes of gold and got into the glittering plunder. He began to like the idea of cutting a flash when he saw Selena. He'd have to get himself a working outfit before he showed up at the Diamond S, but first there would be some time to kill in town.

There would have to be a show of dickering for the job. Engaging a local man, she had explained, would create hard feelings. Ojo Grande was a backwoods place with a passel of inhabitants as ornery as tarantulas. While they would gang up on a newcomer, they'd finally get used to him; on the other hand, if she gave the job to any neighbor, all the others would

carry a permanent grudge against him, which would damage her outfit. So, she had come to Red Fork to find an outsider.

●

Once Shorty Smith was rolled up in his blankets, and snoring off his whiskey, Brinson turned out and made for the tunnel.

Taking a torch of brush, he climbed up the dump and followed the bore. At the end, he found fresh tool-marks, and a blasting-cap which had not lain there long enough to get tarnished. Being no judge of ore, he could not tell whether the recent digging had exposed the vein that had supposedly petered out. Still and all, what he had learned was plenty for Selena to work on.

Brinson lost no time mounting up and getting out of the canyon. With moonrise to guide him, he struck a bee line for the Ojo Grande valley. He had to ride quite a piece before he cut the stage road. Thereafter, he made good time.

The town was dark, and shut down tight as a drum; that suited him perfectly. Selena's cottage was on the far side of Ojo Grande, facing the stage road, and somewhat apart from the neighboring dwellings. It was white, and had heaps of white roses climbing around it. And he could smell the honeysuckles.

"It's awfully handy to arrive and leave," she had murmured, with a promise in voice and eyes, "without advertising to the whole town that you've come to see me."

And here it was, and here he was. The place was Selena's very words, put into solid form. The shades were down, but there was a light. He drew a deep breath and tried to quiet the hammering of his pulse by telling himself that a fellow should not take too much for granted. Still and all, she knew he'd be leaving Red Fork, and she probably was sitting up, waiting for him.

Heart in mouth, he dismounted and made his way up the walk.

HE HAD barely got the gate behind him when the lilacs came to life. A pair of laws popped up from behind the shrubbery. One had a Peacemaker at his hip; the other had a sawed-off shotgun.

"Stick 'em up. Got a warrant for you," came the low-voiced command.

"They're up, but one buck gets you ten if you got any a warrant for me, sheriff! What the hell is all this? I'm fixing to ask if Mrs. Selby lives here."

The one with the white beard smiled grimly. "She sure does; now shuck that gun belt and come along."

As he obeyed, Brinson demanded, "Who am I supposed to be?"

"He don't know who he is. Sam, you tell him."

The one with the drooping black moustaches answered, "If you ain't Concho Jake, I'll eat the barrel of this sawed-off."

"You go back in and ask Mrs. Selby who I am," Brinson challenged. "And when you start chawing your gun-barrel, I'll stake you to mustard and ketchup."

"She can identify you in the morning. Sam, you bring that horse."

There was something plumb loco about the whole business. They acted triumphant, as though they had just won a war.

●

Before herding Brinson to a cell, they searched him. They shook their

heads perplexedly when they found how little money he had.

"Look here," Brinson demanded. "What's this Concho Jake business? I'm a stranger just in from Red Fork, and I don't know a thing about these parts."

Sam Peyton, the marshal, cackled behind his moustaches. "This jigger could dang near talk a shotgun-messenger into heaving the money-box down. Here I'm going through his inside vest pocket and he still asks who is Concho Jake."

"What've you got there?" the white-bearded sheriff asked.

The marshal flashed a photograph. "Look what she wrote on it."

The picture was one of those Selena had taken in Red Fork, during her search for a ramrod. She had given Brinson one. But this one was inscribed, *To Jake, with all my love. Selena.*

"Well, I'm Jake Brinson—Josh Jacob Brinson, from Dry Prong, Texas. I always hated a silly name like Josh, so I been going by Jake. You wire back to Dry Prong."

"We don't care about your parents, and how nice you used to gather cow-chips for your mother; that'd prove nothing. The gear you're wearing is a dead giveaway. Concho Jake, with all the silver conchas; you figure that account you wore a mask every time you stuck up a stage, nobody'd pay heed to the fancy stuff you wore?"

Too late, Brinson realized that he had been euchred from the start. By getting him flung into the jug as a road-agent, the real Concho Jake would have a chance to come out of hiding, and perhaps settle down in Ojo Grande for a quiet life with Selena.

To tell about the poker-game would get him nothing but a horse-laugh. He held his peace, and listened to the lawmen as they urged him to tell him where he and his partner, Short Smith, had hidden all the gold and ingots they had taken. "It'll go a heap easier with you if you speak up—so the express company can get it back afore your pardner hauls out with the loot," they concluded, and then locked him up.

2

THE LONGER Brinson pondered on his plight, the worse it looked. Even if the sheriff *did* pay heed to the story of how Brinson had come by the fancy outfit, and sent out a posse to investigate, nothing would come of it; the road-agent would have taken such a possibility into account. Thoroughly convinced that Selena and the real Concho Jake had teamed up to whipsaw him from the start, Brinson decided that the only way to save his hide would be through strategy.

More than getting out of jail was involved; even though he did contrive to escape, Brinson would be a fugitive until he succeeded in nailing Concho Jake.

In the morning, Hank Wilby, the jailer, brought a larruping breakfast. He was a kindly chap, keen-eyed and plainly no one's fool. "Son," he said, as he slid a plate of flapjacks and eggs under the door, and passed a mug of good coffee between the bars, "this here is from my own table to home. Scoff up, and maybe you'll be in a more right-minded mood to tell the truth."

"Good grub will work better than currying a man with an axe-helve," Brinson admitted. "But I done told the truth. You get Selena Selby to identify me, and get me a lawyer—so I'll know what I'm up against, just supposing I was Concho Jake."

The reward offered by the express-company, and other interested parties, for the arrest and conviction of the road-agent, and the recovery of the loot, gave the local law-officers a heavy stake in their prisoner. But instead of the lawyer Brinson had asked for, they admitted Selena.

She was a sweet and appealing creature, with a lovely face as softly feminine as her shapely body. The large eyes, long-lashed, looked to the whole world—the masculine world, that is—for love, protection, and understanding; and they did not look in vain. At the first sight of Selena, beautifying that dreary corridor, Brinson wondered how he could have spent that long night suspecting her of having done him dirt.

"Oh, Jake!" she cried, as she ran toward the cell and pressed up against the bars, "I was catnapping over my sewing last night; I didn't hear a thing. Darling, I never suspected they were waiting outside, or I'd've managed somehow to warn you."

These damning words gave Brinson a nasty jolt. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Her eyes were perceptibly reddened, and just a bit puffy; not enough, Brinson told himself bitterly, to hurt her good looks, but plenty to be convincing.

"Look here, ma'm! I'm not Concho Jake, and you know it. Why don't you tell them how you met me in Red Fork and coaxed me to be ramrod on your Diamond S? Are you afeard of what your neighbors'd say if you told 'em that?" Without waiting for her to answer, he stepped nearer. "You're fixing to get me sent up or hung for another man."

She reached out, and catching him off guard, drew him to her. He was so taken aback by her response to his reproach that, for a moment, he was pressed up against her as closely as the bars allowed.

"Jake, do tell them the truth," she implored, and in a voice which somehow made him wonder if he might not have been telling lies. "It'll be better for you, better for us. Tell them where the loot is hidden. That shotgun-guard isn't dead; don't let them fool you. He's hobbling around, and he'll be good as new in no time!"

"Woman, are you plumb crazy?" He broke away, then shouted down her cry of dismay. "You hounded me into taking that job."

"Darling, I begged you not to wear that conspicuous outfit. I told you we were being suspected, and that I was afraid they were watching."

"You got the face to say you didn't hire me to be ramrod?"

"Ramrod of what? I haven't owned the Diamond S for two years; you knew I'd sold it. Please do be sensible, won't you?"

He cursed and turned from the grating. Sobbing, she made her way to the door of the corridor. Before it closed, he heard her saying, in the office, "Sheriff, he won't listen to me. But I'll try again, after he's spoken to a lawyer."

Brinson seated himself on his bunk. He began to see a way of turning her treachery against her. The big problem, however, was to make real use of whatever advantage he gained.

AT NOON, Hank Wilby brought in some savory stew and a slab of pie. "Son, the way I see it, you'll get off with maybe a couple of years. That gal's plumb wild about you; she'll be a-setting here, waiting for you to do your time. Never seen such a devoted critter, weeping her little heart out. Thought she was fixing to faint, afore she got out of the office."

"You get me a lawyer," Brinson countered. "This talk about a couple of years for sticking up a half-dozen payrolls, and loads of gold bricks, jest don't go down straight."

●

The lawyer they sent was a keen-eyed man with a beaked nose and heavy brows. "Mr. Brinson," he began, "it seems they have you dead to rights. The sensible thing is to make a bid for clemency. And I can not defend you unless you approach the bar of justice with clean hands, untainted by loot."

"Mr. Allen," Brinson retorted, "my hands are so danged clean as regards loot that I can't pay you a fee, except-

ing you get me some levis and stuff, and take this hoodooed silverware for pay. I am plumb out of money."

The attorney had heard such talk before. "Tell me where the plunder is concealed. I am bound by professional ethics to respect your confidence; neither the court, nor anyone else, could compel me to reveal your secret. On the other hand, my knowing where you have hidden the fruit of your crimes would give me a bargaining point—a promise of restitution for a promise of leniency.

"And one thing more—don't think you can serve a term and then come out to lead a life of luxury on stolen funds. Your partner, your accomplice, Shorty, will in the meanwhile have spent the money. And, though I am mentioning no names, a very attractive young widow will have helped him spend it."

But Brinson went pig-stubborn, so that—in the end—the lawyer brought levis and shoes from the general store, and took the gaudy outfit, including the gunbelt and holsters, which were in the office. The horse-gear was reserved for a future payment. Before the attorney left, Brinson whispered, "I'm not saying I *am* Concho Jake. But if I really was, I'd make a deal with you."

"What sort of deal?"

"I'd tell you where the stuff is hid, pervided I got a couple hacksaw-blades, a good horse, and a head-start. I'd maybe trust my lawyer, but damn if I'd be chump enough to take chances on what a judge would throw at me, or what the express-company detectives and lawyers'd cook up against me. If I gave up the loot, I'd sort of be innocent, and a right-minded lawyer'd sort of want to make *sure* I'd not get the dirty end of the stick."

Mr. Allen studied his client, intently. "Jake—er, *Josh,* helping a suspect to escape would be cause to disbar me. I could not do a thing until I had recovered and surrendered the loot to its owners, and had collected such rewards as are outstanding for said recovery thereof."

WITH THAT, he left. There was nothing on earth Brinson would rather do than get the loot back to its owners—just to spite the coyote who had euchred him. And he was itching for his chance to shoot it out with a son who had so befuddled a woman as lovely as Selena that she'd go to such lengths of trickery. Brinson's rage went to his head and pretty nearly made his skull pop whenever he thought of the saucer-eyed glances, filtered through long lashes, and sweetened by moonlight; and then the kisses she had always broken off, saying with a gasp of ecstacy and dismay, "Josh, I'm only human! No, don't—please, now, I have to have time to think—don't rush me this way—"

Always that promise behind the words. And what she had been doing all the while had been saving the real kisses for Concho Jake, alias Shorty Smith, alias Lord-alone-knew how many other "go-bys". That got him so fighting mad he was not able to be sore at the marshal or the sheriff. Finally, he had no more fury left to direct toward Selena.

"I am lifting the scalp of that skunk," he vowed, "if it takes till Judgment Day!"

His one chance lay in this: that since Selena had picked him for an open-faced chump, he might, by playing it foxy, end by convincing her that he was even more gullible than she had taken him to be; that, in fact, he was simply not too bright—whether born that way, or become that way from having been pistol-whipped, made no difference.

●

A few hours before supper, Brinson

began to rattle the door and shout until Hank Wilby finally bestirred himself and came in on the run. "What in tunket's all the ruckus about?"

"Hank, you been almost like a father to me. Fact is, you been sort of better. My old man used to whale me with a wagon spoke. Once or twice, he smacked me acrost the head with it, accidental-like, not meaning to. He got kind of scared the time I didn't come to for a couple hours, and after that, he always used a quirt. Not a mean man—jest hot-tempered and a bit strict."

"And so you run away from home and begun robbing stages? Well a lot of really fine, good-hearted boys *do* go wrong that away. You tell that to the court, and they'll give you consideration perviding you've coughed up the money. Look at Billy the Kid—his stepfather was a mean critter and whopped the daylights outen the boy. And General Wallace aimed to pardon him, after he'd done kilt fifteen-twenty men—only Billy was downright stubborn, and you know how he ended up."

"I'm damned if I'll confess to something I didn't do." Brinson bowed his head, and with elbows on his knees, buried his face in his palms. With the heels of his hands, he rubbed his temples as though his head ached. Then he looked up, shaking his head. "Hank, I'm a-wondering if a fellow could forget he had God-fearing parents and a good home, and begin sticking up stages. And then of a sudden forget he ever stuck up a stage or train and just remember how he lit out from home. I can't for hell and high water remember ever sticking up anybody, or being in a gunfight. But, gosh-a-mighty—I can't believe a sweet woman like Selena'd just tell downright lies to swear a man into jail for keeps. You suppose when I was talking to her in Red Fork, I'd just done finished forgetting I was Concho Jake and was wanted all over hell?"

Hank Wilby patted his bald head as though checking it for dents and bumps. "Well, now, Jake, mighty funny things happen when a fellow gets slugged and knocked out. It sure is honest of you to try and remember; you aiming to confess?"

"No, I got to think. If something, or someone'd, only be able to get me started figuring if maybe I could've been raising ructions and then plumb forgot, it'd help me make up my mind."

Thoughtful and fingering his chin, Hank Wilby went back to the office. Brinson, though in no mood to grin—either inwardly or outwardly—began to see a chance. There was no doubt at all that Hank would take the matter up with the lawyer, and with the sheriff.

THE FOLLOWING night, Brinson again shouted for the jailer. "Hank, you get the sheriff. I aim to talk turkey."

"Glory be! I knew good grub would do wonders."

Within a quarter of an hour, the law man was in the corridor. "All right, Jake, let's hear it."

Brinson drew a deep breath. "Well, it is this way. According to *my* reckoning, Selena sure done me dirt. But maybe she meant it for my own good, identifying me instead of saying she'd never seen me until that minute. Till I clear that up with her, I'd be brooding and fretting all the time I'm in the pen; I'd be going plumb loco—specially with them not having any women folks in the pen. You let Selena in here—plumb alone and nobody snooping—and by morning, I'll tell you everything I can remember. Uh, about the plunder, I mean."

The lawmen, marshal and sheriff, eyed each other. The looks they exchanged made it plain that either one of them would gladly spend a couple of years in the pen as the price of being locked up in a cozy cell with Selena. And Hank Wilby's expression made it unanimous; envy marked their faces.

"Uh—um—no law against such, none as I know of. Only, it is mighty irregular," the sheriff protested.

"She swore me into the jug," Brinson pointed out. "And you can bet she'd not help me break out; that'd make me a fugitive, which is the very thing she's plumb against."

There was considerable argument, but Brinson always came back stubbornly with these words. "All right, you can all three of you go to hell! I'll take the limit of the law. And when I get out, and if I happen to remember I was Concho Jake and remember where I hid the stuff, I'll have a heap of money for my old age. Which is more'n you'll be having."

•

When they brought Selena, to lock her up with the prisoner, she was all sweet and smiling. "M'am," said the sheriff, "you have all the time you need for persuading Concho that honesty is the best by far and a mile for getting off with a light sentence. You folks'll have a heap to talk about, so there won't nobody butt in till morning—or whenever you're ready to leave. Hank's got his orders to keep his nose out of the corridor. Hank, you hear me?"

"Sure do, sheriff!"

3

WHEN THEY were alone, Brinson said to Selena, "Honey, it don't seem natural, me sitting here, and not working up a rage and a fury about the trick you done pulled on me. The whole thing is so downright loco, I been asking myself if maybe I'm not Concho Jake, and just forgot who I was."

He went into the story of how the old man had clipped him across the head with a wagon-spoke; and he improved it in the repetition. The speculative look in Selena's eyes, when she came in, had become one of contentment as he went on, "All these folks mean it in dead earnest, saying I'm Concho Jake. I'd begin to believe it myself, if only I knew where I got the notion I was Josh Brinson, and met you in Red Fork, the other day, for the first time.

"This far, it is clear as day. I was a-setting on the edge of a watering-trough, seeing the sights and cogitating on where to go and what to do next, when you came out of a store. You'd eyed me when you went in, and you eyed me again, when you came out. Not like any of those fancy ladies the town is swarming with, but a plumb different way. Like if you'd been a tailor, you could have used those two eyeings and set yourself down to build me a suit of Sunday clothes.

"And then you twisted your heel on a chaw of second-hand tobacco or something on the boardwalk, and I picked you up and set you on your feet, and handed you your package and handbag. And I sort of dusted off your skirt, respectful-like, but nonetheless, I had cause to say to myself, 'That's sure a fine figure of a woman.' We begun talking, and one thing led to another. I said I was Josh Brinson, from Dry Prong, Texas, and all the while you'd been studying me, pleasant, only kind of thinking and puzzled. Then you begun coaxing me to be ramrod of the Diamond S. And I said, I'd sure try it.

"I wasn't wearing silver trappings then. I am danged if I know where or how I got holt of them. Maybe I was loco, thinking I was Josh Brinson, a-setting on the rim of the horse-trough."

He looked at her then, with a dazed and bewildered expression that widened her eyes as from wonder and sympathy; it was as though she had encountered more than she had reckoned on.

Selena studied the tanned face and its utter perplexity. He had the manner of a man whose dream has been so vivid that he cannot decide whether the state from which he has just

emerged was reality or fancy. Brinson sensed, from Selena's face and posture, that what he was telling her was not something new. He was sure that Hank had spread the yarn about Brinson's having been hit on the head, and that Selena had been coached to the limit.

"I done heard about a fellow having two of himself in one frame," he went on, gropingly, as though each word had to be picked from a hiding place behind a confusion of ideas and memories. "Two sets of notions about who he is. One time he's a parson for instance; another time, he's a howling hound for gambling and liquor and women. And he makes the switch, in a sort of blank—like when a fellow is walking in his sleep, or saddling up his horse and riding miles afore he wakes up. Hank and the sheriff talked to me a lot along that line; I'd heard it afore, only it never made too much sense."

"It's been terribly confusing, hasn't it, darling?" she murmured, comitting herself only in her voice, which was soft and persuasive as it had been during those buggy rides in Red Fork.

"I was all groping when I rode up to the house. Familiar, only I couldn't be sure. So I was all muddled up when they jumped me; I didn't have a chance. It was right when I was beginning to feel like Concho Jake, and wondering where I got the notion I was Josh Brinson, when they scairt the daylights out of me, and I plumb forgot about Concho."

"You *were* acting strange in Red Fork," Selena said, "looking at me as if you didn't know me. You'd been riding a long way. You remember, we weren't going to meet at my house any more, because it was getting dangerous."

BRINSON nodded, then groped on, "But I've forgot something else." He closed his eyes. "It's about the loot. If I tell 'em where I hid it, I'll get off easy—but I be danged if I know where I put it. They won't believe I forgot; they'll throw the book at me for being stubborn."

He talked in circles, until Selena was convinced that he had thoroughly accepted the idea of having been a road-agent during blank intervals. Always, he got back to this, "But where did I put all the stuff?" He began to needle in a few queries about his partner, the sawed-off fellow described—for lack of a better name—as "Shorty."

At last, Selena leaned close and whispered, "Remember, one night, I persuaded you to tell me where it was? And you told me about a tumble-down settlement on the old road. There was a dug well—no more than hip-deep in water. Nobody'd ever think of looking in the bottom of it for gold, and the gold would sink into the mud at the bottom. Now you can tell them, and you'll get off with a year or two."

"Honey, you promise me you won't be getting tied up with someone else? You and Shorty, for example?"

"I promise, darling; I swear, I'll wait till doomsday."

She was so earnest, so gleaming-eyed solemn, so teetotally lovely that, for an instant Brinson almost believed that it was he—and not Concho Jake—who inspired that glow of devotion. It was such a wonder and such a beauty that the mere presence of it was enough to make him forget that he had sworn to track Concho Jake to a finish, and leave him for the buzzards to wrassle his guts.

"Promise? Afore gawd, and hope to die?"

When she nodded her affirmation, he got a solid armful of Selena. This time, she had none of the subtle defenses that had always guarded her in Red Fork; nor was there any of that deference he had always had for a lone widow. He had an armful of Selena, and he was sealing the pact with a kiss that meant business and for keeps; she tried to wriggle free, but accomplished nothing more than make the clinch tighter.

"Honey, they vowed and declared they'd not come busting in on us," he assured her, as he improved his hold. "And now that I can tell 'em where I hid the stuff, they'll let you come back maybe for a final good bye—"

"Let me go!" she panted. "Oh, good Lord, what are you thinking of—*don't!*"

She was an exciting bit of baggage, and more so than his most ardent fancies had pictured during those moonlight drives. Her efforts to break away were only inflaming. "They mightn't keep their word, honey—"

HE CAME near forgetting that this was a game to offset her own. He might have forgotten entirely, had she not wriggled and then torn herself clear. Strength and desperation caught him off-guard, leaving him with nothing in his hands but the better part of her blouse, and a few bits of ribbon and stuff. She let out a scream that shook the jail. It was piercing from terror and outraged sensibilities; it verged on hysteria. The lout had caught her off balance and was going hog-wild and out of hand.

The corridor-entrance burst open. Hank Wilby came pounding along. Selena shrieked, "Get me out of here; he's crazy!"

"Honey, you hush up!"

Brinson lunged after her. Selena's hair had come tumbling down to her hips. The splendid, ruddy-golden mass of it confused his hands; his foot twisted on a hairpin she had shed. He took a header, carrying her with him into the corner, all in a fine flailing of skirts and legs. She was a very busy woman, but not too busy to scream for help. And Hank Wilby, all in a lather from the sight of a good deal more of Selena than had ever favored her many rebuffed admirers in town, had the devil's own time getting the right key.

"You let go of that gal or I'll pistol whip you till your eyes pop out!"

"She says I ain't Jake, and she's sure acting it," Brinson gasped, and got a fresh hold.

Hank pounced in.

Brinson's mind was not quite as much centered on Selena as the appearance of things suggested. Before Hank could clout him, Brinson heaved Selena smack up against the jailer. The impact knocked him end for end, over the cot; he never had a chance to pull a gun. Brinson cold-caulked him with a clip across the back of the head from the edge of his palm. He bound the girl with strips of her own skirt, hog-tied the jailer, then gagged them both with Selena's hosiery.

Then, kneeling beside her, he said, "I pretty near did go loco, facing all this here. But with me gone, and Hank hearing you screaming and cutting up instead of acting affectionate, they'll for sure know I am not Concho Jake; they'll light out for to find him wherever he is.

"And something else I been saving till I got you where I wanted you. After Concho pulled his slick work on me, I followed him, figuring he was a claim-jumper and maybe had partners. I aimed to sneak up and see how many he had. He thought he'd left me snoring drunk where we'd made camp and et. He heard me, pulled a gun, and we shot it out. I drilled him, and left him moaning and groaning; then I up and rode.

"Now I'm going back to finish him. I'm feeding his carcass to the buzzards, if it's the last thing on this green earth I do."

The choked moan from behind the gag told him that she believed him, believed every word he had said. She was so giddily in love with Concho, that any thought of harm to him would drive her loco.

Brinson locked the cell. In front, he found Concho's guns, a belt belonging to a deputy, and a handful of cartridges.

After a sashay to the livery stable, he got Concho's horse, without awakening the hostler. He had until sunrise—or half an hour thereafter—be-

fore anyone would learn that something had gone wrong at the jail. With such a head start, Brinson figured he had a good chance to cut sign on his own account; with any luck at all, he'd make good the yarn he had fed Selena, out of pure cussedness.

HE RODE to the canyon where he had met Concho Jake. Whatever he might do, Brinson was not going to the "dug well," in which Selena said the loot was hidden. Without doubt there actually was a portion of the plunder hidden, just as she had told him. For Brinson to tell the lawmen about it would only clinch the notion that he was Concho Jake. And, having revealed only a small portion of what had been stolen, he would get the limit of the law, because of his supposed trickery. This was, of course, no more than surmise; yet it did explain Selena's reason for assisting him to "remember."

By the time Brinson would have made his confession, and been herded to the pen, Selena and Concho would have got the unrevealed portion and made good their escape. Clearly, Concho would not have a hideout anywhere near the well. While this did not tell him where to find the bandit, at least it told him where the outlaw would *not* be lurking.

Once in the canyon, Brinson struck light and examined the hoofs and shoes of his mount. He studied the prints the critter had made near the spring, and devoted equal attention to sign left by his own animal, which Concho had taken in trade. Bits of volcanic cinder, and glassy flakes of obsidian were still embedded in the frog of the hoof. So, going down the canyon, Brinson made for the lava-beds. He did not have to wait for daylight to trail the outlaw, because the clues embedded in the hoofs of the animal Concho had ridden from his hideout gave a good idea where the trail could be cut when daylight came.

Before dawn, Brinson reached the curve in the mountain-range, where it came nearest to skirting the wastelands. He could just distinguish the long windrows of tumbled fragments, thrusting up from the flat spaces. Clambering to a nearby ledge, he waited until, in the early gray, he could tell the smoothness of cinder-dunes from the jagged rims of heaped-up lava.

•

The first flush of sunrise brought the dead expanse to life; tricky shadows shifted and changed color. Cutting sign where there was neither earth nor vegetation, and hardly any dust, was going to be a chore.

On the chance that the slanting light would expose a trail that could not be seen by full day and overhead sun, Brinson shifted to get a better angle. All his trouble won him was the realization that he was about to venture into a Chinese puzzle, a man-trap and a deadfall, built by nature for unwary strangers.

A flight of quail rose against the sunrise. They had come to drink at dawn; something out there in the *malpais* had alarmed them. He noted the spot. Jake and his partner, Shorty, would not be hiding far from the spring that drew the birds. Then he heard the braying of a burro; the tiny beast's voice carried like a cavalry trumpet.

Brinson paused to fix the landmarks in his eyes and mind. There was nothing in the wastelands for prospectors; outlaws had no use for slow-footed burros, except to carry loot too heavy for their saddle-mounts. The pattern took shape, and according to his earlier surmises. While the law was relaxed and triumphant, from having nailed one they believed to be Concho Jake, the real article could come out

of hiding, brazenly make for safety, and at the slow pace of heavily-burdened park-animals.

Brinson climbed down from his perch. Hobbling his horse, he left the critter in a gulley. The saddle-bags were empty, except for a few scraps of jerky, and the whiskey-bottle he had recovered at the spring near the mine tunnel. This now contained his water-supply. He picked out the tablespoonful of oats lodged in the creases of the bags. Horse-fodder, but something for a man to chaw on. He was hungry as he set out, with only a pair of six-guns to pit against rifle-armed lurkers who knew the *malpais*, every yard of it. They could get around in that dangerous country in the dead blackness of night more certainly than any stranger could move by day.

Brinson was not handy enough with arithmetic to figure the odds that were stacked against him, nor did he not try. He simply went on in, either to leave his bones there, or else to bring the bandits out, their carcasses crosswise in their saddles.

4

BRINSON spent hours in crawling along fragment-littered channels, backtracking when he came to impassable spots. He came near breaking through the glass-like ceiling of one of the monstrous bubbles that had been formed under the surface when the red hot fluid had chilled. Finally, he caught a glimpse of the sickly green of a few blades of grass that grew near the hidden basin which had attracted the quail. Blazing heat beat down, driving to cover everything but an occasional horned toad.

Now that he was near his goal, he learned that the lava-ridges and the cinder-dunes which enclosed the flat space, the approach to the hidden spring, offerel no concealment. Either there was a hideout so secure that he could look at it without being aware of it, or else he had come on a wild-goose chase.

He could get no closer until darkness covered him.

Nearby, and out of the line of sight of anyone hiding within the circle of dunes and ridges, he found a hole in the hard floor. The collapse of a layer of lava had exposed what appeared to be another of those underground-bubbles. He let himself down into the shadows; because of the debris on the floor, the drop was little more than a yard.

He had no more than taken a gulp of the blood-warm water in his bottle when he noted that this underground space was a tunnel, almost perfectly circular, and reaching on a gentle slope down into the lava mass.

He followed the passage, since each yard from the opening gave him cooler air. The floor was coated with fine dust. Presently, shivering in the dusk, he halted to look back toward the light. It was only then that he noticed footprints other than his own. They were old sign; air-currents had almost blotted them out. There were two sets, both made by men wearing boots.

Other tracks showed how the two had returned.

Brinson pressed on, into the darkness, feeling his way to avoid possible deadfalls. Soon an air-current fanned him; before long, he caught the scent of tobacco and of animals. The tunnel curved, until he could no longer see light when he looked back. Already, the darkness thinned; debris blocked his way. There was a barrier between him and the joining of tunnels, apparently to form a "Y". Beyond the obstacles, he heard the stirring of animals, and a mutter of voices.

Somewhere, there was a cave-in, which had left such a heap of fragments that four-legged critters could be driven in from the surface. The

opening could not be distant, else light would not reach in so far.

His job had, of a sudden, become simple; he had merely to backtrack, locate the cave-in, and go in a-shooting. It was as simple as sudden death —and simpler by far than the way the desperados and a woman had contrived to rope him in. A toe-to-toe shooting-match with either outlaw would be a contract. Taking the two—but again, Brinson refused to estimate the odds, lest he get cold feet.

OF A SUDDEN, the voices became louder, clearer, as though men who had previously muttered drowsily about nothing at all were now on the alert. There was the clashing sound of a lever flicking a cartridge into a Winchester, Rocks rattled. Then, "Hold it, Shorty! That there's Selena!"

Brinson jammed his face against the barrier, burrowing and wedging himself into crevices. He twisted and forced until he got a glimpse, for an instant, of Selena, sliding from the saddle, and into the arms of Concho Jake. She had ridden, Brinson surmised, right down a steep slope of debris and into the tunnel. Sunlight, now slanting, reached far under the overhang of the broken roof.

"Darling, darling," she cried; "he told me you were hurt."

The other man, short and blocky, picked up the big bundle she had dropped. "Bandages and things," Selena went on, breathlessly, almost hysterically, "Oh, I couldn't believe it, but somehow, I had to—just suppose you and he *had* shot it out, while Shorty was here, taking it easy and supposing you were simply staying because you had other things to do."

Concho cut in, "When you came night before last to see about dumping gold into that well, you might've known nothing'd happen to me from tangling with that skillet-headed galoot! If anything'd gone wrong, Shorty'd known by then and he'd've told you."

"Oh, I know! But I was afraid maybe Shorty was keeping something from me, so I'd not be too shaky to carry on and convince that lout that confessing would be the best for him. Jake, if you'd only been here instead of Shorty, I'd not have spent such a miserable night!"

"Well, well, I'm fine as frog's hair." Concho chuckled. "So that stand-up and fall-down told you that him and me had had a shooting-scrape and he come off without a scratch! I'd had him fixed up like a lead mine afore he could say Jack Robinson."

"Of course you could, even if there'd been two or three like him; but he might've suspected a trick, and shot you in the back."

"Huh! He wouldn't suspect nothing—even if he set down on a red-hot horseshoe. Well, now, how's it all going?"

"He broke jail; he's on the loose."

Concho cursed bitterly. "Shorty, can you tie that! When'd this come off?"

"Last night," Selena answered. "Wasn't till this morning when they found the jailer, hog-tied. I was wild! All I could do was wait till the posse struck out before I coud come to do what I could for you. But the way things are, it's not so bad."

"How come, honey?"

"I told him about the dug well. It seems he lit out in that direction, because that's the way he knew. He'd take that instead of a strange one. I had to bide my time to light out when I'd not be noticed—and then I had to stay put a while longer. The posse sent a man back, all in a lather."

"What for?" Shorty demanded.

"Get more men. A second bunch to go up the stage road, to head him off in case he skimmed the edge of Red Fork, while they're beating the brush and hills in that direction. See, *they* are on a wild-goose chase. Breaking out is really better than having him in the hoosegow, where he might do or say something that'd make them suspicious he wasn't you."

THEY BEGAN debating as to which of the several ways out of the lava-fields they should take. The descriptions and words meant nothing to Brinson, so he backed away.

Once back to the opening in the lava roof, he quickly picked a course that could not be observed from the over cave-in. He saw how Selena, riding in, had made tracks on the flank of a cinder dune; the shifting of the sun had exposed details which the glare had hidden at the time of Brinson's entry.

As he crept in a wide curve that would bring him into line with the entrance to the hideout, the full impact of his predicament began to register. Unless he caught the men at a moment when they were bunched up, he would have not a Chinaman's chance; getting the drop on one would not be enough threat to check the other.

He worked his way behind a ridge of cinder that rimmed the open space, and climbed up to its crest. Peeping over the edge, he could see the break in the roof, though he could not look far enough into the bore for a glimpse of the outlaws. Chunks of lava a good yard in diameter, and shaped like plum-puddings, dotted the level stretch.

Once down from his lookout-spot, Brinson hurried along the foot of the dune until he came to its shoulder, where it curved like a half-moon, and tapered off to ground-level. There was a gap of a dozen yards before he could win the shelter of a ridge of lava fragments. By skirting this barrier, until he came to its end, he would be kept from view until—very near the break in the ceiling—he would have only a few rods to dash in the open to get right at the edge of the hole.

From that direction he would not be visible to anyone in the tunnel; he would then be over that part of the bore which housed the outlaws. If they were looking out at all, their limit of vision would include only the lower part of the long dune Brinson had just quit. He would be in a position like that of a man on the flat roof of a dobe, crouching right over the only doorway through which occupants had sooner or later to step.

Brinson was on the point of crossing the open space between one barrier and the next when he heard the rattle of a dislodged fragment. Selena came up as out of a cellarway. Without so much as a glance about her, she made for the spring at the further end of the arena. She had a coffee pot and a small kettle.

That was when Brinson changed his mind and his plan. Whatever the two men were doing, they would pay no attention to the sound of Selena's return. And now, the light from the outside would be all on one wall of the tunnel, instead of reaching lengthwise. The sun had shifted considerably.

Brinson made directly for the opening from which Selena had emerged; she had her back to him. Before getting to the spring, she would have to cover twice the distance he had to cross. He took long, springing strides, moving at a crouch, going always from one of the yard-high lava pudding-balls to the next, so that if need be, he would have cover.

The ruddy light came low and slanting from behind him. Shadows of each irregularity cropping up made a long streak, breaking what had been flat monotony under overhead sun. He and his shadow blended with the stretch ahead of him.

Selena's purposeful gait assured him; she was apparently all set to do a bit of cooking, while the two below were packing the animals. A chill trickled down the back of Brinson's neck; he became light-headed and light-footed, moving as though he trod on clouds. He loosened the

guns in their holsters. Though this was the craziest trick he had ever dreamed of, it was the chance he had prayed for, during his hours in jail.

Without warning, Selena stopped short, as though startled. She whirled so quickly that she spotted Brinson while he was still in the act of flinging himself for cover. The lid was off now, and hell a-boiling over!

5

THE SUN was full in Selena's face. Her expression showed that she had been alarmed before turning; that her glimpse of Brinson had only added to the effect of whatever she had at first seen. Because of the glare, it was doubtful that she had recognized him at once; it took her a second or so to be sure that it was a man, and not a trick of light and shadow.

Brinson made the most of his moment; he bounced to his feet and dashed for the opening. Then, as though released from the paralysis of fright, Selena ran toward the entrance and let out a scream that must have reached across the lava beds.

Now that the alarm was given, Brinson had to go ahead. There was no retreat, no chance for a second trial. The outlaws would hunt him down to make sure he did not escape with information. Selena was nearer the hole in the roof than Brinson, but despite his long legs, it would be a close contest.

She was saving her breath, as though she realized that the men were too far back in the tunnel to hear her until she screamed from the very entrance.

The dash lasted only a few seconds. This, however, was long enough for Brinson to see what had happened. His thoughts flashed so quickly that it was as if he had taken all day to observe, and think things out. Selena, from the spot where she had halted, had got the first sight of the horse which now hove into Brinson's view. She had been in a position to spot it well before it came from behind the shoulder of the further dune.

The horse was the one Brinson had bought from Concho Jake, and had ridden from Ojo Grande in his flight. The sight of the familiar animal, and of the broken hobbles had told Selena all she needed to know. Wherever Brinson might be, she had reasoned, in her sudden fright, that the posse could not be far away. Her glimpse of the fugitive himself—apparently drawing the law down on the hideout—was all that was needed to stampede her.

The horse had evidently cut his hobbles apart on the sharp lava. Freed, and thirsty, he had made for the well-known spring, and the familiar tunnel.

It was just that simple: one slip, leaving Brinson euchred to a turn, and with an alarm to announce his arrival. Though he had a pair of guns, he doubted that he'd last long enough to empty one.

At the lip of the opening, he stumbled. He recovered without falling, but the break in his stride had cost him enough speed to give Selena another yard. And now, when her cry would count, she saved her breath, and flung herself against him.

In his instinctive effort to keep his balance, he caught her by the shoulder. His weight and speed were too much; together, all in a whirl and a tangle, they lurched headlong down the rocky incline. They landed in a huddle against the smooth wall.

CONCHO and Shorty, turning from the burros they had been packing, had pulled their guns. It was Brinson's entanglement with Selena that made them hold their fire; the delay, brief as it was, gave him time to recover from the jarring impact.

Half-stunned, Selena got herself clear, screening him until she stumbled out of the way. She was too dazed to say a word.

Surprise helped offset the odds. Crouching in the murky shadows, Brinson cut loose. Answering fire made the tunnel rumble and thunder with echos. Bullets glancing from the ramp spattered him with biting chips. Shorty, drilled dead center, pitched forward and lay there without a kick or twitch. Brinson, firing through his own smoke, was knocked against the wall.

He did not know how hard or how badly he had been hit. He knew only that, though conscious, he was numb and unable to keep his feet. He had wasted his chance, and had drilled the less important of his enemies. Shorty, no more than a name, was down, while Concho stood there, surprised yet untouched.

The pack-animals stampeded. One, grazed by a stray shot, started the rush, and Concho, bowled over, fired wildly—missing by yards when he should have finished Brinson.

Brinson, wavering on his knees, kept himself upright. His right side was paralyzed; blood soaked his shirt. His first gasp of breath was like a stab. He managed to switch the smoking Colt to his left hand, and blasted a pack-animal that swerved from the ramp, while the others went a-helling up, followed by the horses.

The beast dropped. The small carcass and the heavy *aparejos* fixed to the pack saddle made a good barricade. Here, though wounded, Brinson could command the exit as long as he was able to pull a trigger.

His next breath came easier and his vision cleared a little. He had been hit twice—once, high at the angle of the neck and shoulder, and again with a nasty rake along the ribs. Concho, knocked stem-winding and temporarily out of Brinson's sight, was stumbling toward the gun which he had dropped. He was shaken up; he could have drawn the other Colt from its holster.

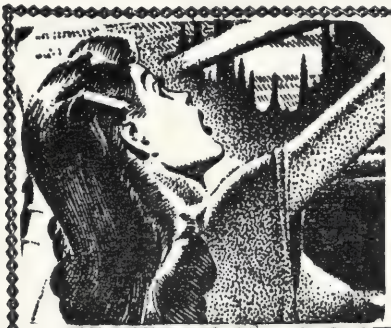
Brinson found he could make his legs work; he got up.

Selena screamed a warning, and Concho whirled.

Brinson, clearing the dead burro, came at him, came a-shooting until the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. He drew the other Colt, then saw that he had no use for it; Concho was done for.

Selena bounded toward the outlaw. With a cry of fury, she snatched his weapon. Brinson got to her in time, and yanked it from her grasp; her last chance gone, she sank to her knees beside Concho.

Brinson went up the ramp, his legs ready to buckle. He was shaky, all



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BECAUSE OF THE STARS

by Charles Dye

leading off the July issue of

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

burned out, and at the same time, giddy as though he had drunk a quart of liquor. He staggered toward the spring. Of a sudden, he had become mortally thirsty; his mouth was filled with the taste of powder and metal and blood.

He wondered if he would be equal to the chore of loading the two road-agents across their saddles, and driving the pack-train out of the lava beds, or whether he would have to spend the night there with the dead, the dying, and the heartbroken.

The strange thing was that, after the dirt Selena had done him, her voice—as she knelt beside Concho—took all the edge from triumph. He had a queer feeling of self-reproach, as though he might—if he had acted quickly enough—have pistol-whipped Concho to take him alive.

THEN, WITHOUT warning, men rode into view from the shoulder of the dune which had covered the approach of Concho's horse. Brinson was facing guns before he could make a move. He got his hands shoulder high, the best he could manage.

"What's all the shooting?" the sheriff demanded.

"Shooting's over; they're in that blowhole tunnel yonder."

One of the deputies let out a whoop and rode for the now quiet burros. Dismounting, he opened an *aparejo*, and took out a canvas bag, and then another. "Express money! Heaps of it! Seals and all!"

"Take this jigger in," the sheriff said, "and don't take any chances this time."

"Hey, what do you mean, take me in? I done told you the shooting's all over. I settled it; Concho Jake's below, with Shorty and Selena. Come on, and I'll show you I'm not him; if you think I am in fitten shape to amble away from here, you're loco. Look at me."

Taking his guns, they prodded him into the dusky tunnel.

They halted at the foot of the ramp when they saw Selena still beside the outlaw. "She's out of her head," Brinson muttered. "Trying to cry and talk him back to life to answer her. This convince you? She don't know I'm alive, and she can't admit he's done for."

The sheriff frowned. "Could have been three of you jiggers in that gang, stead of jest two. Three, and one gal—and enough gold to start half a dozen banks." He pointed at the ingots and the bags not yet loaded into *aparejos*. "Ain't the first time road-agents shot each other up, so's one could hog it all."

Brinson exploded. "You're dumber'n Billy-be-damned! If I'd been one of this gang, would they'd've wanted me in the jug? Wouldn't Selena have said I was *not* Concho, instead of trying to brand me the way she did? If I'd known anything at all about this hide-out afore just now, they'd been too afeard I'd talk to save my own hide. Her selling me down the river would, for sure, of made me sore enough to talk just to spite them."

The sheriff nodded judicially. "You got something there. Fact is, I been wondering a heap. I was wondering from the start, more or less. That's why we didn't ride the way everyone in town figured we would. Following that horse helped plenty."

"You knew the sign? Same horse that'd left prints around Selena's house when you first begun suspecting her?"

"Sort of. Only, I wasn't taken any chances till I found out what was what."

And then one of the deputies, rummaging around the camp gear, let out a hoot. "Hey, sheriff! Here's this jig-

ger's picture—don't you be too free and easy gulping his yarn."

Brinson grinned. "It's one of a mess I had took in Red Fork, same time Selena had some took of herself. She must've given Concho one to study, so he'd know me when we swapped rigs—"

And from here, he went on to tell of his meeting with the silver-plated stranger who called himself Shorty Smith. When he had concluded, he picked up another point: "And here's something else for you to look into. You go up to that tumble-down settlement above the canyon you trailed my horse down, and see if there's a dug well with some loot throwed to the bottom of it.

"Once she was sure I was sewed up, she come back to get that extra touch fixed up. Then when you locked us up in the cell, and I pretended I was a mite loco from being whipped acrost the head, and was beginning to believe maybe I *was* Concho Jake—only I'd done forgot where I hid the stuff—she up and reminded me, so I could confess.

"And you can figure what'd happened if I had told about what's probably just a smidgeon of gold. Instead of an easy sentence, I'd been doing time till kingdom come. Which'd made it easy for these folks to make a clean getaway."

"You sure would have been in a fix, bub," the lawman agreed. Then, "All right, start packing up. And let this here Josh Brinson ride on and get hisself doctored. You reckon you can sit a horse all right?"

"You show me the horse, sheriff."

He turned to the ramp.

The lawman called, "Hey, Josh!"

"What?"

"You better be mighty careful in case you meet any widows on the way."

"Any smooth-talking females I meet on the way," Brinson retorted, "had better be mighty careful about dealing with me!"

★

Our Big, August Issue's Feature Novelet

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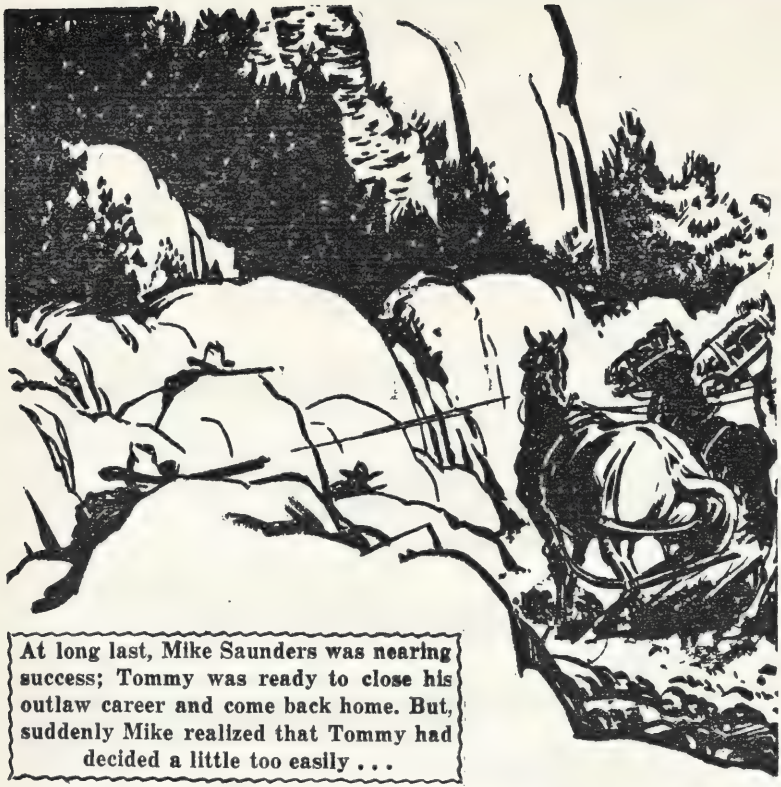


At long last, Mike Saunders was nearing success; Tommy was ready to close his outlaw career and come back home. But, suddenly Mike realized that Tommy had decided a little too easily . . .

Ride Those Gun-Damned Hills

by Art Kercheval

MIKE SAUNDERS slammed two thousand miles of pent-up hate into his draw, gun leaping from his holster in a silvery flash. Chuck Fresno tried for his own, but he was a trifle tardy; Fresno crumpled, grotesquely, here on this high mountain trail, dying hard, fast as he had lived.

Mike was about to stow away his Colt, when the quick step sounded on his left; he whirled, gun level again. Instantly he relaxed—in spite of the fact that the stranger had a gun held on him. Relaxed, though he didn't lower his own weapon a shimmering iota. The intruder was a beautiful young woman. Dark, kind of; nineteenish; menacing, right now, as a burlap bagful of squalling wildcat. She

thrashed out of the brush into the open.

"I know who you are," she said, gripping her weapon tighter. "Mike Saunders."

He nodded. "Somehow my name got here ahead of me; I'd admire to know why, Pretty Eyes."

She had a mounting fury; her brown eyes flashed, hot, moist. "Don't you suppose Prouty Shame's mentioned you hundreds of times?" she asked. "I'd know you among a million."

"I killed Fresno just now," he said. "If things work out, Prouty will be next to come to guns. You're right familiar with everybody's name; where do you fit into the picture?"

"I'm going to kill you before you get your whack at Prouty! That's where I fit in, Saunders!"

"Whew!" He kept his gun poised; "you seem to like this Prouty feller."

"Prouty and I are going to be married." Her finger tightened on the trigger. "Prouty's wonderful, to me—understand? No matter what folks think."

"Maybe you could give me some details." Mike moistened his lips. "Maybe I'd be right interested; I'm a stranger in these parts, remember?"

"I'm Beth Demling," she said, readily enough; "I'm the librarian in Freedom. Prouty risked his neck to come into town and borrow some books. That's how we met. Prouty's been wronged, Saunders; you don't believe that, but it's true."

Mike said, "You don't talk and act like no library-lady."

He had to end this thing, fast; he started walking toward her. He told himself she wouldn't shoot.

He was suddenly minus his hat—and the bullet had singed his hair. Abruptly he halted, amazed at this determined girl. "You mean business."

"Damned right I do," she went on. "Next time I won't be so soft-hearted about it, Mister; next time I'll drop you in your tracks."

"Whew again! What a librarian!"

HE MADE the only possible move he had left, then. Gun still ready, he plunged toward her, counting on surprise. It startled her into a retreat, into the thorny brush. She let out a yelp and half stumbled backwards, somehow managing to keep her gun. Mike closed in, his descending barrel knocking her Colt from hand. He quickly scooped it up, tossed it far into the undergrowth. Beth Demling struggled to maintain her equilibrium. "You—you—"

Mike had to grin, now. "Foxy, ain't you? Maybeso I been missing something by not going to libraries."

"I don't pretend to be educated," she snapped back, whipping raven hair away from her eyes. "But I can want to be. A girl don't always have to be a come-on in a dancehall. When nobody else wanted the library job, I grabbed it; I got the chance I've wanted to do some reading. And I meet people. Fascinating people. Wait—where are you going?"

He put away his gun. "Hunting up Shame," he said, tightly. "Then nature will take its course."

"But why? Why?"

He gave her his parting shot: "Since names are being strewn around so free-like, maybe you've heard of young Tommy Coyne. Tommy means more to me than my next breath of air, if you can understand that. Because of what happened to him, two years ago, I have now killed Fresno, gladly. Shame gets the same dose of medicine, for the same sidewinder reason."

Now he was gone from her, pushing through tangled bushes and arriving at his horse. Mounting, he gave the animal its head. Beth Demling, he thought, would be a long time finding that gun. Maybe she never would. But he gathered she'd lost her momentary mood to fill him with holes.

●

"Mike! It's been a long time."

Mike wrenched in leather. He stared. "Tommy. I've been looking for you." He blinked once as the other rode into full view, ranging abreast.

There was a slight twist in twenty-four-year-old Tommy's smile. "My old nursemaid; coming to take me home."

Mike felt an inner pain. "I had hoped that, Tommy. Come a thousand miles or two to talk some sense into you. Knew the job would be kind of rough; knew I'd have to kill a couple of men. But one of 'em's gone, now."

Tommy nodded quickly; the smile never left. "Fresno. Mike, I saw it all from a ridge yonder. I reckoned it would happen someday."

"You don't seem excited."

"It's a hard game I'm in," Tommy said. "Maybe I like it, maybe I don't. But I had to learn not to vomit when I saw blood spilled; I have no feeling for Fresno."

"Come home with me, Tommy."

The smile faded. "I'm way past twenty-one, Mike," he said suddenly; "I make up my own mind now. This isn't your butt-in."

Mike bit down on an oath, before it made sound. "But it is, Tommy, every bit my business. We're almost like blood relations. Once, I believe we were closer than blood. We were raised by the same woman, your mother. Yes, we were close as flies from the day we rode our first ponies until we growed up. Then you got snagged into bad company."

Did Tommy's eyes cloud a little? "I met Shame and Fresno, and I liked the way they cut their swath."

"Robbed your first bank," Mike went on. "Fresno or Shame—either one—murdered the bank president. That tied up things pretty tight for you, I'll admit; the three of you had

to leave New Mexico, pronto. But I've had a hunch about you, Tommy."

"Meaning?"

"That you don't jibe into this kind of life. That you're sick of it. You don't lift an eyebrow when I gun down Fresno. I won't call you a kid, no more, but I'm thinking you're a man with a heap of savvy. We're going back to New Mexico, to the little ranch, to Maw. She's ailing and she needs us both there. I promised her, if you was alive, I'd bring you back."

TOMMY cursed; you could tell this bothered him. "Damn you, Mike. Damn you anyway."

"There's one other job I got to do, Tommy; that's to get Shame, before we go. No other way around it. Old Man Washburn, the banker, was a kind of dad to me, seeing I never had no folks. Just before he croaked, he got out a name, and I heard it plain. Prouty Shame. I could never live with myself if I didn't even the score—"

Tommy was biting his lip. "Maw. I sure would like to see her, I reckon."

Mike crowded his bronc close. "There's nothing stopping you."

Tommy looked up. "Oh, isn't there?" he said. "Mike, there's plenty you don't savvy; you ain't seeing me through clear eyes. Maybe-so that's because we were dumb, innocent kids who liked to do everything together. All that's past. I'm tough; I'm different. I say it because I know it. Maybe one minute I want to go with you; maybe the next I don't. Even if I did get soft and do it, there's Prouty."

"I told you I'd take care of Prouty."

"That's a prize laugh, Mike. Nobody takes care of Prouty; there ain't a gun fast enough."

"He wouldn't be in Fresno's class," Mike agreed. "But I've done something to my draw, since Washburn cashed in his chips. I'll give Shame a run for his gun. If only—"

Tommy shook his head. "Maybe I *like* the set-up, Mike. Good pickings in this Oregon country; in these Skyrocket Mountains, we've got a goldmine, me and Prouty have. You make it so we don't have to divvy with Fresno, which same makes much bigger gravy. We knock over banks and stagecoaches, and chouse off some beef, too. We hole up in the Skyrockets, when matters get hot. But it worries me some, how you found Fresno. We thought no man—"

"You forget I'm a tracker," Mike reminded. "I reckon I've got patience. Two years I've been planning this, and working. One thing led to another, and I got wind the Prouty Shame gang's up in Oregon in the Skyrockets. The rest was easy—cold-trailing, till I got onto a fresh bit of sign. It happened to lead me smack-bang into Fresno. You know I'll find Shame's trail—if he don't come hunting me, now that I done in his pal. Either way, it's all right with me."

Tommy halted his horse abruptly, he swung and faced Mike, a high fierceness in his eyes. "Mike, I'll do it! I'll go back with you!"

Mike's jaw dropped. "You mean it, Tommy? You will?"

"Of course I mean it," Tommy snapped. "I been weighing this in my mind, while we've been talking. You don't know it, but I've been weighing it for two years. I think, all along, I wanted it to be this way—you coming after me and coaxing me to come home. You're right; I'm fed up with my two years of Fresno and Shame and cowering like a yeller dog up here in the Skyrockets. Let's head for New Mexico, Mike."

Mike said, "You can help me speed the moment, Tommy; you can tell me where to find Shame."

Tommy rowelled his horse. "No, Mike; it wouldn't work. I told you before—you can't beat Prouty. You'll have to forget Old Man Washburn. Only way it'll click, is we ride out on Prouty. Prouty don't like men quitting him, and he'll ride ten-twenty-miles to chop down a backslider; but I don't guess he'd foller us clean down to New Mexico."

TOMMY made sense, Mike had to admit. If he wanted to preserve the bright picture of Tommy racing rough-shod home to Maw, they'd have to play this last game just like he demanded. Mike rolled facts over and over in his beaten brain. The kinks in them he straightened out. He got on the firm foundation, now, that Tommy Coyne's future meant more to him than avenging the murder of a friend. He felt a whole lot better.

"I know trails Prouty don't," Tommy said, as they rode, steadily, up a blue-granite slope on the south face of a big mountain. "Even you wouldn't find 'em for a month. I've picked the one that'll get us out of here, easy." He chuckled—and it was a soft, pleasant sound. "New Mexico. I can hardly wait. The old days, back again. The three of us, anyway—you and me and Maw. Could be four, someday."

"Eh?" from Mike.

"You met her—Beth Demling. Sweet on Prouty. Prouty could always spout off about books, you remember; that gets her. But you can't tell. I'm thinking, hard. She likes me. We're good enough friends. Someday, I might send for her; if she's got Prouty out of her system, maybe she'd up and marry me."

"Maybe," Mike said. "'Pears Miss Demling's got a yen for books—and owlhooters."

They rode on, through hot afternoon sunlight, Tommy taking the lead. Mike knew contentment, for the first time in two years. Good old happy-go-lucky New Mexico. Maw's last days filled with bliss. Mike could see her tears of joy, now. Tommy molded back into the old shape. Helping Mike make the ranch go. The shadows of the Skyrocket Mountains never reaching down that far.

He fought back a certain reluctance to leave, however. This job wasn't finished, now it never would be. Prouty Shame would live on, killing and pillaging. Somebody's gun, sometime, would reap him down; but that might be a long ways in the future. Mike wanted Shame to die—for Banker Washburn, wanted him to die for Tommy Coyne. For it was Shame, and his companion, Fresno, who had led Tommy into big trouble.

Tommy was already bucking up man-size, going straight. You could sense that in the erect saddle-shape of him; there was a levelness about the eyes that was missing before. Warmth was between them, now, and it would be everlasting.

The Skyrockets were magnificent today with pine and aspen and tumbledown granite and buckbrush-lined creeks, but a mood of viciousness had laid hold on them. For the Skyrockets had been made-to-order for the activities of outlaws, and one of them was left—Prouty Shame. Mike could almost feel his presence. With him alive, Mike would never be able to love these hills. Tommy was angling them up a side canyon, now, and he hit a dim trail. Mike reckoned it was the getaway trail he'd mentioned.

Of a sudden, it catapulted into Mike's overwhelmed brain that something was wrong—radically! He had a glimpse of a log shack, here where the trail widened, and it acgured into him that this was outlaw-headquarters. But it was not this which caused him to yank up his bronc to a stop, hand going deep and swift for his gun. It was an awareness that he was already too late. The man behind the rock-jumble to the right was triggering a drawn Colt. The ball went ripping blackly into Mike; worlds mingled and danced whirly dances, and he knew he was going out of leather. As if it were a piece of driftwood in an angry sea, he clutched at saddle-horn and hung and rattled. He thought he heard a tiny laugh as he spilled headlong. He seized onto his consciousness and wouldn't let it slide. He just had to know.

"This is the way it had to be," came Tommy Coyne's cheery voice. "I'm right behind you, Prouty, and I aim to let you have it. I figgered I'd

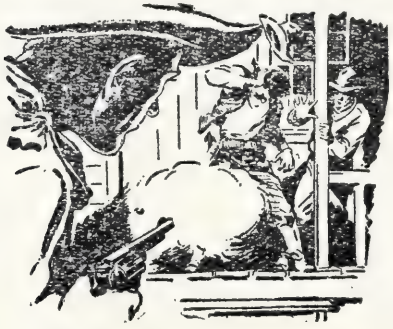
get the drop on you while you were busy with the poor sucker at our feet, and it worked."

MIKE PRIED open his eyes, finally. He saw, then, and still couldn't believe; Tommy had eased out of saddle, eased behind his outlaw boss. Prouty Shame didn't have a chance—not a chance in the world of wheeling and getting Tommy, before Tommy's gun went off. But that wasn't what consumed Mike's attention. It was this Tommy out there, with the murder-gun. This Tommy who hadn't changed, would never change. A Tommy who had lied, who had completely fooled Mike Saunders. Old inner pain began to twist in Mike.

There was the blast of Tommy's gun, there was Prouty wilting, and there was Tommy's wide-open laugh as his outlaw companion settled on the ground and quit moving.

"We have a big pile of loot now," Tommy kept laughing. "Did you think for a minute I was interested in a three-way split? When the time was ripe—when you were no longer useful to me—I aimed to finish off you two. That time would be when I figgered our efforts had made me rich enough to quit risking my hide. That time is now."

He went on: "Maybe I could have bumped you off some dark night; maybe it would've been simpler. But this is just as well, the way it worked out. My thanks to you, too, for ridding me of Mike Saunders. He's kinda like my conscience, and I can't afford to have a conscience." He smiled. "Mike figgered me for a poor kid getting off on the wrong track, but he didn't know I was the brains of the whole deal. Didn't know I'd talked you two into pulling your first jobs. You had the fastest gun, but I was the boss. And Mike would turn over fast in his new-found grave if he knew it was my bullet that done for Old Man Washburn."



Mike wanted desperately to have strength, wanted to crawl out of this near-blackness and to pump a death slug into Tommy Coyne. Strange, but he wanted to do that. He was thinking of Banker Washburn, but he was thinking of more. There was Maw; there was his own traveling of two thousand miles of twisted trail; there was, in a manner of speaking, Prouty Shame. There were hordes of folks, many places, who had been wronged by the flashy, gun-quick Tommy Coyne. Gone, Mike believed now, was the warmth; if any heat remained in him, it was a fresh new hate.

Suddenly she was there. Beth Demling—Beth, who must have been following. Beth, who had flung herself out of saddle and who was fairly throwing herself forward. Beth, who seemed to go all to pieces as she went down beside fallen Prouty Shame. Beth, whose wracking sobs made the pines uneasy. Mike wished he didn't have eyes, wished he didn't have ears.

"Tommy, maybe I'll see if she'll do that over your body."

It was Mike who said that, breaking free somehow from his weakness. Sloughing off the infernal black, and reveling at the flow of strength back into his arm, his hand, finally his trigger-finger. Tommy spun, gun flicking around to make certain of Mike this time. The spin was half accomplished. Mike squeezed out his bullet; it went upward into Tommy's chest. Tommy didn't cry out. His own gun

slipped out of his hand, and he fell abruptly; it was over that quickly.

●

It was Beth who saved Mike's life, attending his hurts, seeing frequently to his bandage. Mike realized his move to get at his own gun, while Shame was firing, had been enough of a twitch to stave him from quick death. But credit belonged to this beautiful girl who liked books and outlaws.

"Where are you going?" she asked that day he was well again.

"Back to New Mexico," he told her. "Maybe, on the way, I'll find a way to tell Maw."

He rode, then, to the south. He thought about many things, twisted things, but there was one that was straight. Tommy, in fact, had supplied the idea. Beth Demling might fit into the picture. He'd just have to see about that, after he'd eased an old lady's hurt somehow and spruced up her neglected ranch. He left the shadows of the Skyrockets far, far behind.

☆

Gold in Them Thar Streets

by J. J. Mathews

When the news about the discovery of gold in California hit the East, it caused rise to a variety of rumors. Was it true that a man had found a nugget the size of his head? Could you make the overland trip without fighting Indians? How many guns should a man take with him?

So, Horace Greely, of the *Tribune*, sent Bayard Taylor to California to find out what was what. Now there was one story that had hit the shores of Europe: The streets were golden—you could stop, dig, and earn a day's pay. Fantastic? Crazy as it might seem to us, it actually happened.

Bayard landed in San Francisco and went to visit the gambling joints. He saw a boy of fifteen win five-hundred dollars. Then he walked down the street before the United States Hotel—and couldn't believe what he saw: a dozen men were actually digging up the earth with knives and crumbling it in their hands. Then they would blow the fine dirt carefully and a few specks of gold were the net profit. A gold-hunter would earn about five dollars a day and it wasn't exactly profitable. He was almost tempted to write that there was gold in the streets. It was true because he saw it with his own eyes. But from where did the gold come? So he used his better judgment and did some checking.

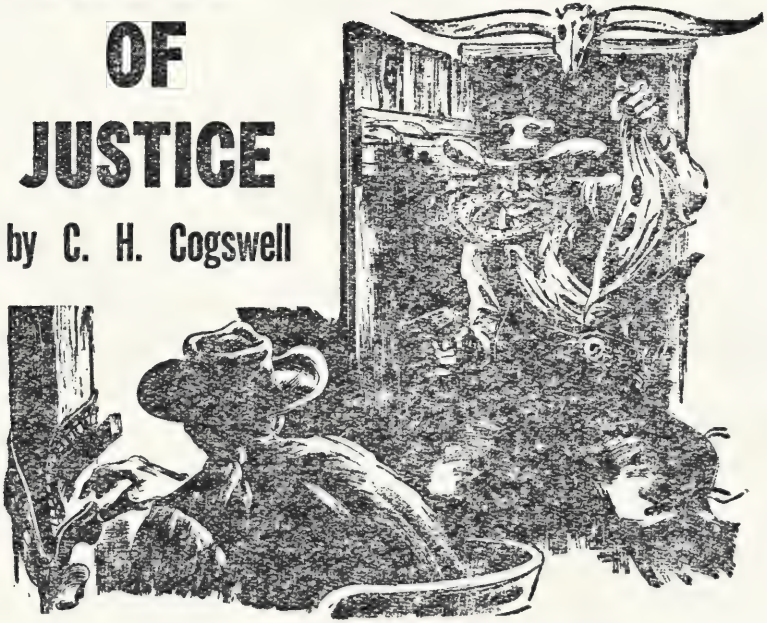
Seemed the gold was the result of leakings from miner's bags and the sweeping from the stores. Miners paid out gold dust in the stores, and some dust got on the floor; then the owner of the store would sweep out dirt and gold dust into the street.

★

BADGE OF JUSTICE

by C. H. Cogswell

"Ever since I was a button, I've dreamed of being a lawman, and capturing outlaws."



"I took this badge from a dying U. S. Marshal, and it's haunted me, Slim. It seems almost alive — as if the man it belonged to had become part of me — and is driving me on to complete his unfinished business. I can't hold out any longer — I've got to find a man . . ."

FOR ALMOST a year and a half now, we've been saddlepards," Red Williams observed, as he peered across the fire at Slim Picken, "and you ain't said nothing much about yourself." He poked the fire with a stick. "Seems like we ought to get a little better acquainted."

"Why the sudden curiosity, Red?" Slim asked thoughtfully. "Ain't nothing much ever happened to me. I'm a quiet type; don't do nothing to bother anyone; tend strictly to my own business and expect others to tend to theirs. When I work, I work hard; when I play, I play hard; when I fight—well, I'll guarantee you, someone will know they've been in a fight!"

"I ain't questioning your nerve or your ability." Red's blue eyes twin-

Feature Novel of Strange Destiny

kled as they looked into Slim's large sad brown ones. "It just happens we're out of a job and you know I ain't saved a dime for the dry-spell. Raised too much hell paydays, and it's my own fault; but I've got a scheme. A kind of desperate scheme, and I was kind of wondering if you would be the right guy to side me. In a way, raising hell can be an advantage."

"Can't see how raising hell ever does anybody any good." Slim shook his head as though trying to probe a proposition and look at it from two sides.

"But I asked you an honest question," Red said sharply. "It's come to a place where I've got to know. You sit around all the time reading those books, and when you talk you talk about what some Chinaman said a thousand years ago—or one of them Greeks or Hindoos. Are you a Professor, or something, and got kicked out of College? Where did you come from, anyhow?"

"Texas," Slim spread his long arms, and they made shadows like the flapping of the wings of some huge prehistoric bird. "I guess you know Texas covers a heap of territory. There are parts of it where folks is rich and prosperous, and then there's parts of Texas as is damn poor. I was raised in the damn poor part, where we had to chop out the mesquite to make a place to raise our corn and beans. It was years and years before I ever wore boots. I was the youngest of ten kids."

"Ten kids!" Red repeated. "No wonder you're so gloomy and glum and thoughtful all the time. That's something to think about."

"You're right," Slim Picken nodded his high forehead, and the solemn expression on his face would remind one of a sad-eyed bloodhound. "Maw raised us up single-handed. Paw was killed in a gun-ruckus when I was about three, and one by one the older boys left. When one of them would get big enough so he wasn't satisfied, Maw would hint that he had his own life to live and the world was big enough even for a Picken. We was all tall and slim like Paw."

"But where did you get your education?" Red persisted.

"Ain't got no education," Slim denied. "No one has an education like you talk about; I'm just *getting* an education. Everyone who wants to be educated is always getting more and more education; it's like climbing mountains that never cease getting higher and higher all the time. Each time you get to the top of one, there's always one a little higher beyond."

"But you talk like—" Red hesitated.

SLIM WENT on. "Well, it was this way; since you got me on the subject, maybe I'd as well spill it all. The oldest boy, when he left he come to me—I was about five or six, then. 'Clarence,' he says, 'take good care of Maw.' And I thought he meant it even if the others all laughed. Really, Maw can take care of herself; but when Jerry rode off, you could see she was all broke up inside. She wasn't one to show the white feather, though; not Maw. 'It's good of you to be thinking of our welfare, Jerry,' she said. 'There will be one less mouth to feed.'"

"Your Maw must have been made of pretty tough fiber," Red encouraged.

"In a way yes," Slim agreed; "but, as I said, I could tell she was all busted up inside, because Jerry left; and when the rest of the boys was back in the field she went inside and really let it out. I was too little to be missed much in the field. I listened to Maw bawling, as long as I could stand it then I went in to her. She hugged me close and laughed. In spite of our meanness and ornery ways, I knew she loved us. 'You Pickens,' she says,

'are like Texas Longhorns. You've got to be tough and mean and ornery to get along in a rough country like this.' Yep, Red, she said a mouthful. A man is a product of the land he was raised on."

"That might be true," Red agreed, "and I'll grant you that living like you must have lived would make a man strong and husky; but the real testing of a man is when he's up against other men."

"A man shouldn't be against other men," Slim shook his head solemnly. "That's the trouble with the world and always has been—one man agin' other men. Nope, put it this way—the best test of a man is not how he comes out agin' other men; but *how he comes out with other men*. There's a heap of difference."

"It's a fancy idea," Red argued, "but from what I've seen, you can't expect much out of a man until he's drove to it."

"Don't get me wrong," Slim went on to explain. "There's times when you'll be agin' someone; you just can't help it, and when it's necessary you've got to be ready—else people will take advantage of your weakness. I can't help remembering what Paw said one time. Paw said that when he was a young squirt, he had a few drinks one day, and was feeling pretty wild. 'I kin lick anyone in this room,' he yelled. Paw was six-foot-four, same as me, so no one objected. "I kin lick anybody in this whole damn town!' Paw shouted; and still nobody wanted to argue the point. 'I kin lick any man in the whole state of Texas!' Paw shouted, waving his long arms. Then a little guy steps up to him and looks him in the eye. 'Yore takin' in a heap of territory, ain't yuh, son?' he asks mildly—as if he was trying to talk Paw into a more peaceable humor. 'Yeah,' Paw sneers, 'and I meant just what I said Pee-wee! The whole state of Texas!'

"And that's as far as he got; just as he leaned forward to look down at that little guy, the little guy swung one up from the floor and hit Paw on the jaw. 'Somethin' exploded in my brain,' Pa said, 'and I heard a thousand sparrows all a-chirpin' at once. Now listen, you kids, and don't forget this. I taught you all I know about fightin' with fists, and guns and knives; but I don't never want to hear of any of you a-braggin' about what he kin do—leastawise in no saloon. But if you do, remember this; yuh won't have no trouble with the big guys. They don't have t'fight generally—just bein' big is enough; it's the little guys, and the middle-sized guys, yuh got to watch. They're the ones who always have to prove what they kin do. It's easy to overestimate the strength of the strong; but never underestimate the strength of the weak; they sure will fool yuh sometimes!' Well, I reckon Paw said a mouthful. If it's necessary to be agin' someone, first thing you better calculate your chances of winning."

RED GRINNED his wide, boyish grin. "You talk right interesting Slim; first thing you know you'll have me staying sober and saving my money—same as you. But you haven't told me how you got started reading all that stuff. How did you go to school in that gawdforsaken place?"

"Maw had a mighty high respect for book-learning," Slim explained, "and she wanted us to go to school and learn something; but she needed the bigger boys for working in the fields. She made the three youngest ones go, but the two older than me didn't take to books. They stayed out and played, and made me tell them what I'd learned, so they could tell Maw. It worked for a while, until Maw caught on; then she made the other two work in the fields and rode with me on our old plug horse to school until I got big enough to ride by myself. And even then she didn't trust me too much about it. In the evenings she'd line the others up around the room

with a switch and make them listen while I read to them by lamplight. I'd read until the words was just a blur and sometimes I'd fall asleep over the book. At first I was just reading words; but after a while they began to take on meaning—and when they did I didn't fall asleep any more. Even when there wasn't any school, and I was supposed to be working in the fields, I'd slip off and hide behind a bush with a book. Instead of being mad, Maw acted sort of pleased. I discovered that reading and studying—and pretending to know something—is a pretty good way to get out of work."

"Yeah," Red said with a hint of envy. "I noticed how the bosses favored you, inviting you up to the house for supper and all. I see why, now; reckon you probably earned every meal."

"And then some," Slim agreed. "They wouldn't admit it, but I rather inferred they was glad to have someone around who knew how to figger. Mostly, they just wanted someone to check up on them and tell them they were right. Anyhow—I learned something from that; you can come right out and tell a man, without mincing words, if he's right; but if you want to keep his friendship, you better be careful how you tell him when he's wrong. Now tell me, Red—what is this risky proposition you got up your sleeve?"

2

THE FRONTIERS of the world have always been a refuge for criminals, an attraction for adventurers, and to those who wish to escape from themselves, or unsatisfactory family-life—a feeling of independence. In the early days of the West, a man was accepted at his face-value, just as the dollar is accepted, and no questions asked. The name he gave was good enough, even though he had another one east of the Mississippi; he had a chance to rise or fall on his own merits.

Though he had nothing to hide, Slim Picken was usually reticent about his own background. As he looked at it, he had nothing to brag about. He never stopped to think that it isn't where you start from, but which direction you're going that's important; he overlooked the fact that he had made excellent progress against long odds. His own poverty was still too close to him like a hungry wolf on his trail. In a way, Slim envied Red, and other reckless cowboys who threw away their paydays in wild reckless sprees, yelling and shooting up the town. It was rather amusing, in a way, to see the women and kids scatter, the dogs and chickens run for cover and the men of the town step unobtrusively behind something solid which would stop a stray bullet. Drunken cowboys got careless and shot at signs and such just for the hell of it.

The cattle-drive north which had brought Slim and Red together had also put Slim under obligation to Red. Slim was riding point when the storm came up. Forked lightning danced over the long-horns and some were struck; before he knew it, Slim was in a wild stampede and he realized he would be trampled to death if he could not turn the fear-maddened beasts. He was caught in a pocket with steers on either side of him.

Then out of the gloom, riding the best horse in the outfit, came Red. There was that same reckless don't-give-a-damn expression on his face he wore when raising hell in town, as he came yelling and shooting and quirting his way into the rushing torrent of cattle. Slim remembered that as it was revealed to him when the lightning flashed again. No one but a crazy

fool would attempt to do what Red was doing, yet Red was making progress. In a little while he was at Slim's side. "Ride with 'em Slim!" he shouted. "Get on the tail of that big steer there and push him up to the front!"

One on either side, they took after the big steer quirting him to greater speed. He dashed ahead bellowing, thrusting his huge horns from side to side, making a narrow opening for the two riders. They quirted the other cattle aside as they went, and, little by little, passed up to the front. The big steer was soon leading the stampede.

Gradually they began to turn the cattle into a milling mass. There were still stragglers on the fringes; but the cattle were beginning to circle, when a large steer lunged out and gored Slim's horse. Slim lit on his feet, running. He could vaguely hear the shouts of other cowboys coming up to turn the herd, but could expect little help from them; they were not close enough. Red alone seemed to sense what had happened. As the lightning flashed again, to reveal Slim running for all he was worth to keep ahead of the approaching longhorns, Red wheeled his horse. Laughing at the danger, he rode again against the stream of almost-certain death. Slim leaped up behind him and they worked their way out of danger. Slim did not thank him. Neither of them ever mentioned it; but in his heart Slim resolved that if Red ever asked him to do something—no matter what it was—he would do it.

And now Red had asked; this was the pay-off. Red had a scheme up his sleeve, a desperate scheme to make some money. Slim knew nothing about Red, had taken him at his face value; in a tight, he had found Red was a man you could ride the stampede with. That was enough for Slim; he wouldn't ask Red anything he was not willing to tell of his own accord.

"What's this scheme you mentioned Red?" he asked. "I told you all about myself—and, like I said, I ain't got much to brag about. Ain't much for bragging, anyways; I figger if a fellow brags about hisself, he's just doing it to cover up something he'd rather not have you know. I've done a lot of reading, and I reckon I've missed a lot of good points—we can't learn and remember it all. The main thing I've got out of it is that it *did* start me thinking; and once in a while something pops up I've plumb forgot."

RED REACHED into his shirt pocket for an object which he flipped toward Slim. It glinted shiny and bright in the firelight as Slim reached up with a careless paw and snatched it out of the air. He examined it in the firelight. "Well I'll be derned! You a U. S. Marshal, Red? I ain't surprised. A badge of Justice! I've been a-speculating about what was a-eating you."

"No, Slim," Red denied as if embarrassed, "I'm not a U. S. Marshal; but what's a-eating on me is the same as if I was. You see, when I was a kid, we used to play Sheriff and Outlaws like kids will. We used crooked sticks for guns and holiered 'Bang! you're dead!' and such stuff. I always liked to be the Sheriff; but when I got older I was kind of wild. Instead of being the Sheriff, I had a leaning toward the outlaw side."

"But how did you come by the badge, then?"

"I'll come to that, because that badge is alive, Slim," Red said in a worried voice. "Anyhow—it's alive to me. At first, I was going to throw it away—and then I got to thinking it might come in handy. It was like a silver dollar in my pocket, a-burning a hole to be spent. It wouldn't let me rest—maybe it's a symbol or something like those little dinguses the priests wear."

Slim's lean face was perplexed. "You're talking in riddles Red; maybe you'd better start at the beginning.

I can't make head nor tails of what you're getting at."

"Well," Red went on, "I was punching cows for the Circle Cross Outfit, over New Mexico way, and we was a pretty wild bunch. We hit town after one payday, and was throwing our dinero around, high wide and handsome, where I got lost from the outfit, somehow. Another free-spending outfit hit town about time we were supposed to be leaving. By then, I was broke; but this new outfit I'd never heard of kept setting up the drinks. I don't remember things too clear; but I remember the leader and I had a shooting match in the saloon, and he was pretty much impressed with how I handle a hogleg. Anyhow, he said I'd be a handy man to have along where he was going. I ended up trailing a herd north."

"A stolen herd?"

"That's right," Red agreed, "and with as tough a bunch of hardcases as I've ever seen. There was a brush with a posse and I realized I was in a hell of a position. If I was caught, I'd be hung; if I shot my way out, and was recognized, I'd be branded as a killer and an outlaw the rest of my days. When that gang sobered up, they realized they hadn't picked up a bargain when they brought me along. I was like a white bull in a herd of longhorns and the first day I had such a headache I wished they'd shoot me and put me out of my misery."

"Some people never learn," Slim observed.

"Or if they do, they learn the hard way," Red conceded. "I generally learn everything the hard way. Anyhow, I got along with that gang by stepping easy and keeping my mouth shut. The leader, a big fellow with a red beard, a mean eye and hair-trigger nerves was a pretty foxy hombre. They called him Zeke, and that's all I knew him by. He had a scheme figgered out if we was chased by a posse; some of us was to drop back on either side of the trail and the rest was to go ahead and lead the posse on, shooting back and keeping their attention. As the stragglers picked off the posse from concealment, it would not be easy to tell where the shots came from until it was too late."

"A murderous scheme," Slim said thoughtfully, "but a good one—based on sound military precedent."

"Zeke had twenty men," Red explained "and this posse was only half that many; I was one of the stragglers left behind to pick them off. Of course, the posse didn't know Zeke had that many men because half of them were concealed along the trail. A little short fellow called Squint was with me and when the posse went by and I didn't shoot, this Squint is a-standing off to one side of me and he gave a little sneering laugh. 'I think I smell a rat,' he says.

"I turned my head and then I knew what he meant. The opening in the end of Squint's gun was looking at me like an eye. Squint stood there beside that big rock and I read murder in his face. His lips was drawn back like those of a trapped coyote and I could see his finger tightening on the trigger; he wasn't going to give me a chance in the world.... Call it luck or call it the Lord if you like—I'm not up on such things. Anyhow, just then a bullet zipped over Squint's head; he ducked just as he fired. Maybe one of the possemen saw him and shot at him; I don't know. Anyhow that bullet saved my life, I reckon, because Squint missed my head by scant inches; I shot him through the heart."

SLIM LOOKED thoughtfully into the fire, as if conjuring up fantastic visions in the flames. A peculiar feeling of alarm went through him—an inner compulsion to shun and avoid this red-headed, smooth-talking tempting devil. It was as if Red's words had the capacity to unleash all the wild and discordant impulses Slim knew he

possessed. One thing they had in common—a capacity for violence. With Red, this was a dancing devil who knew no restraint; with Slim it was a sleeping and untried giant. Yet, with Red's words, the giant stirred, yawned, blinked his eyes and began to look around. It was a critical moment for Slim; he felt that he was about to commit himself to something which would change the course of his life.

Red clenched and unclenched his fists then stood spraddle-legged over the fire. "This thing is bigger than I am, Slim; I've had it bottled up inside me now for so long, with no one I could trust to tell it to, that it's driving me mad. I can't stand it any longer."

"Well—set then, and go ahead with your story," Slim made a little gesture indicating Red's bed roll. "Go ahead and get it off your chest; but if you tell me something you hadn't ought to, don't blame me or shoot me so I'll keep your secret. I ain't making no pledges."

"One time," Red reminded him, "your life was in my hands; I didn't laugh at you and let you down, Slim. Can't you do the same with my confidence?"

"Go ahead and spill what's eating you."

"I was lying there beside the trail," Red resumed, "when one of the posse's horses turned and bolted back down the trail toward me. The man had been shot out of the saddle and was being dragged by the stirrup. I jumped out and seized the reins, got the man loose and drug him over beside Squint. This hombre was still alive, but bleeding from a bullet hole in his chest. I bandaged him up as best I could—though I didn't expect him to live. I come across that badge in his pocket and I knew that if Zeke and his men came back and found it, they'd put a bullet through his head. I don't know why; but when I thought of it, I could feel that bullet myself. It was as if I was that marshal—as if his spirit was entering into me. I started to throw the badge into the brush, but, something told me not to. I've carried it with me ever since, and whenever I think to get rid of it a voice seems to say, *'Better hang on to it, Red, it might come in handy.'* Is there any such thing, Slim, as trading spirits with another man?"

SLIM SHOOK his head thoughtfully. "I ain't never heard of it. Could be, though—seems like—now that I think of it. Take a reckless guy like you, now, who doesn't have a thing to live for, and doesn't put much value on his life. Now here is another guy who has an overpowering purpose to live. Now—let's suppose you're leaning over this guy, about to die—well, maybe that spirit that wants to live takes over the body of the guy who doesn't care."

"I knew it!" Red burst out. "That's just how it is—or else this damn badge has some sort of hoodoo or charm over me. I'm a changed person ever since I come by it. Even when I knew that Zeke wouldn't be back, because another posse was coming up, I had an impulse to stay and meet them: it was all I could do to get myself out of there so I wouldn't be caught and hung.

"It looks like one of two things Slim, like you say. That marshal's spirit took over my body and is driving me, or else his spirit entered into that badge. I've had an almost overpowering urge to hunt down outlaws ever since I had it. I never had no personal desire to kill anyone, before; but now I've got a feeling that someday I'll hunt down Zeke and kill him. It's as if I've got hundreds of reasons for doing it and can't put my finger on one. Is there such a thing as a man's spirit going into a lifeless object like that badge and using influence on the person who has it?"

Slim looked into the fire, thoughtfully, and the flames leaped and crackled as he tried to unroll the secrets of the past ages. "Christian

thinking is all agin' it, Red," he said finally.... "Apparently you've got yourself into a hell of a mess of some sort, and you've got to work it out, somehow. I reckon you've already got some sort of a plan else you wouldn't have mentioned it. Does all this have something to do with your stunt to make money?"

Again Red reached into his shirt pocket; this time, he brought out a folded piece of paper which he handed to Slim. It was a reward-notice for one Glen Stoner, wanted for bank robbery. The picture was not good but Slim wondered at the face. "Kind of intelligent-looking feller. Figger to capture him for the bounty, Red?"

"I've got it to do," Red responded, his voice raw, his manner that of one driven by some strong compulsion. "I've fought as long as I can stand it. I saw this Glen Stoner once, but he didn't see me; he stopped with a couple of his men at an outrider's shack where I was staying. It was only when I came on the reward notice that I knew I had to bring him in."

"Got any idea of where to start?"

"There's a place called Twin Buttes —about a week's steady riding from here," Red responded. "I'm enough of an owlhooter to get in touch with the grapevine. If Stoner ain't there, I've a hunch I'll be able to pick up his trail there. Anyhow, it's a good place to start."

"What sort of a place is Twin Buttes?"

"Tough," Red responded; "run by the outlaw element."

"If they found that badge on you," Slim observed, "it would probably mean a bullet. Maybe we'd better do away with it. You ain't a U. S. marshal—not really."

"But I am, Slim—I tell you, even if I ain't got the papers and the real authority, I'm as much of a lawman as that fellow I left there dying along the trail. It's my job and I've got it to do. I won't part with that badge!"

Slim brightened, "I tell you what. No use getting killed over a thing like that. Package the thing up and mail it to yourself some place. We can send for it or call for it later."

"Okeh," Red agreed, reluctantly, "but I don't like it. I'll feel naked without it. It's as if it gives me ideas —tells me what to do."

"Well, Red," Slim consoled, "if there's any thinking to be done, don't figger to do it all yourself; I'll give you a hand. You can't trust those spooks, nohow."

"You'll back me up on this then, Slim?" Red asked with almost boyish eagerness. "You're with me all the way?"

"All the way," Slim agreed, solemnly.

3

THE TRAIL into Twin Buttes was a rough one, strewn on either side with huge rocks and scraggly brush as high as a man's head. Slim rode his tall black horse; but he was no longer Slim Picken. He was now Professor Pew from Cambridge—and a very uncomfortable professor, indeed. He wore a tailor-made black broadcloth suit which had cost him misery in the purchase, and misery in the wearing. He was weird-looking in it, for it made him look even taller than he really was; and the stovepipe hat which crowned this absurd display made him taller still.

"I tell you Red," he complained for the hundredth time, "this get-up ain't no disguise; it's a straight-jacket. It would have been a lot easier for us to just ride in, natural-like, and say we was a couple of waddies out of work. Now there ain't no sense wearing a hard collar like this here. I've got a notion to rip it off; it's choked and chafed me till my neck's all raw."

Red grinned at his companion's discomfort. "You'll get used to it. If your

Maw could see you now, she'd bust with pride. Why Abe Lincoln would be put to shame in that get-up—stovepipe h..t, white starched shirt and tail-coat. The only giveaway is the boots. Not much chance getting a Texan out of his boots."

"Didn't have nothing big enough to fit." Slim grimaced. "Now don't you go getting ideas about buying me some of them there button shoes. I won't wear them; besides I don't like this idea, anyhow. You're a-fixing to get us both shot."

"Now remember," Red prompted. "Don't you do no talking unless you get paid for it; here's a chance for you to get paid for what you know instead of for what you do. Come to think of it, if I wasn't drove to it by that badge, I believe we've got an easy way to make a living."

"If you're asking me," Slim growled grumpily, shifting wearily in the saddle. "There ain't enough brains between the two of us to catch a gent like Stoner. If this idea of yourn runs out, maybe we should just give up the idea of catching Stoner for the bounty."

THEIR ARGUMENT was interrupted, suddenly, by the appearance of two tough-looking men who stepped out abruptly with rifles at the ready. "Take it easy, you two; keep your hooks high and yuh won't get hurt," said one of the two as he looked upward at Slim in awe. "What d'yuh make of this, Smoky?"

Smoky appeared almost ready to drop his gun and fly for his life. "Ten feet tall if he's an inch. Can't just one bullet stop a man like that. Where'd you two come from?"

"England," Slim said impressively, drawing himself up so he looked even taller. "Cambridge, England."

"Put down your guns and make way," Red moved up protectingly. "This is Professor Pew; make way!"

The two gunmen looked at each other, uncertainly; this was certainly something out of the ordinary. "Maybe you'd better do as he says, Smoky. You go on ahead and make way; tell the boss what we got, and send back a dozen men to bring them in."

Smoky was ready to comply; in fact, he was more than ready. He disappeared into the brush, and a moment later his horse could be heard tearing up the trail toward Twin Buttes. The other rifleman waved his rifle at them significantly. "I'll be back, and if you two know what's good for you, don't try any funny stuff. I'll be right back."

Red looked at Slim, winked, and grinned. "See? What did I tell you? In a minute we'll have an escort fit for royalty!"

"Or a hanging," Slim agreed. Then, when the other man returned he spread his long arms toward the heavens in a broad gesture. "What ho!" he shouted.

"What ho!" Red repeated as he put spurs to his horse. "What ho!"

●

A dozen men were waiting for them at the outskirts of the town, and Slim, acting as if this were an everyday occurrence, headed the procession as they started down the one and only main street. He drew up in front of the *Lone Eagle* saloon and carelessly looped his reins over the hitchrail. Red did the same and preceded Slim to the swinging doors. "Make way for the Professor!" He shouted as he flung the doors aside. Except for one bearded man standing at the end of the bar, the place was deserted.

As the others crowded in, Slim strode to the far end of the saloon, put a chair to the wall and pulled up a table. Red went behind the bar and emerged with a tray laden with empty whiskey-glasses. These he placed before Slim in a semi-circle and began filling them up from a whiskey-bottle he took from his pocket. "Drink up, Slim," he whispered. "It ain't whiskey; it won't hurt you. It's tea."

Slim nodded and downed a glass

with a gulp. "See if you can shake me up some ham and eggs."

"Sure thing, Professor," Red responded, enjoying himself immensely. "Hey," he shouted, "where's the proprietor of this joint?"

The bearded man, also in somber black approached. "At your service, gentlemen," he said suavily. "What will it be?"

Red gave the order and began mixing with the crowd. Slim sipped at the tea as a man will who enjoys good whiskey. Red was trying to drum up business. "Look at him," he said, "look at that head. You wouldn't believe it, but there is one of the most brilliant minds in the world. Just ask him anything. Any personal question you have, just ask him; he'll give you an honest answer for a buck—an answer to any question for just one dollar."

SLIM WAS a curiosity; the place began to fill up. But if the populace had problems, or questions to ask, they were cagey about putting them to a stranger. Slim and Red ate their ham and eggs and Slim looked gloomy. "I reckon this Professor idea won't pan out so good, Red."

"It's working all right," Red responded half-heartedly. "Anyhow as good as could be expected I think. Did you get a good look at that fellow, Wade?"

"Wade?" Slim asked, bewildered. "Don't know who you mean."

"The man with the beard," Red explained; "the proprietor of this place. Ain't there something familiar about him?"

"Well, now that you mention it," Slim agreed, "seems like I've seen him before."

"I'm not sure," Red continued, "but I think this fellow, Wade, is the man we're after; I think he's Glen Stoner."

"Well, if he is," Slim frowned thoughtfully, "we'll play hell getting him out of Twin Buttes; he's got enough men to stand off an army."

"Yeah," Red admitted, "but we've got to trick him. If we could just get him off alone, somehow—"

Slim grunted, "Unhuh. If we could kidnap him out of this den of wolves, all we'd have to do is ride a thousand or so miles, turn him over to the law, and collect our reward. Simple. The only thing is—we ain't sure if he's Stoner."

"To be sure, we'd have to shave him, Red admitted. "I'm sure I'd know if he was shaved.

"I got a razor," Slim said, "and I've got some soap. Go tell him we'd like a good look at his face and maybe he'll let us give him a shave."

An old prospector came up. "Professor," he said worriedly, "I got a problem I can't make heads nor tails of. It's about my wife; I can't seem to understand women."

"Good," Slim pushed away his empty plate. "Take these dishes away, Red, and bring me some more whiskey; got to keep my brain oiled. Now, sir, take that chair and tell me your problem: women *are* a problem unless you understand them right from the start. The best way is to treat them gentle—but firm. If you're gentle and firm with them you can make them do anything you want them to do. Thank you, that's right, one dollar cash on the barrelhead."

One after the other he picked up and downed at a gulp the drinks which had been placed before him. He smacked his lips as if he enjoyed them. "Got to keep my brain oiled," he repeated. "Now, let's have your problem."

The old man talked, for he had just enough to drink to make him feel sorry for himself. Slim's mournful appearance, his hound-dog expression and sorrowful brown eyes made the oldster that much sadder. By the time he had finished his story, he had a crying jag on. What he wanted was not advice, but sympathy. Slim gave it to him. "Treat them gentle," he repeated as the oldster turned away; "gentle and firm." But he was uneasy where he sat, for though he said little, all eyes

were upon him—especially the sharp eyes of Wade, the bearded proprietor of the place.

He knows, Slim thought. *He knows I'm a fake. I wonder what he'll do about it?*

THEN WADE was standing before him. Slim glanced around and he could see many eyes measuring him. "I've got a question," Wade smiled suavily. "You answer any question for a dollar?"

"Any question," Slim nodded.

"All right." Wade pushed a dollar toward Slim as he settled into the chair. "Tell me, Professor: What's your game?"

"What do you mean, 'game'?" Slim demanded.

Wade laughed sarcastically. "Why, you're ridiculous; You're no more a professor than I am. Come on, out with it; what are you two up to?"

Slim stood up to his full height. "I resent that, sir!" He looked down on Wade with hurt dignity. "I demand an apology. I'm Professor Pew from Cambridge."

Wade turned to the men. "He's a fake," he shouted; "throw them out!"

Slim looked around, then, and saw Red move in beside him. A peculiar glow went through him; he licked his lips with a strange anticipation. He had never been in a saloon brawl; he avoided saloons until now—but here was something which stirred him deeply.

"Stand back," he shouted at the two brawny men who were approaching. "You can't get enough of you yellow-bellied coyotes around me to throw me out!" He seized the chair by the back and held it up before him.

The men paused, and out of the corner of his eye Slim saw the bartender coming around the end of the bar with a bung-starter in his hands. Two men were closing in on Red at the same time, but they were too slow; Red caught one of them under the chin with his fist and the man went over backward. The bartender rushed at Red with the bung-starter upraised; Slim thrust out with the chair and the bung-starter crashed into the bottom of the seat as Red sent his second assailant sprawling.

"What's the matter with you?" Wade shouted. "Afraid of two men? On them, damn you; on them!"

The two brawny toughs, who had hesitated, now leaped across the table at Slim. He caught one of them behind the ear with a chopping blow of his fist; the man sprawled on the table, turning it up on edge. The other was thrown off-balance; Slim picked him up bodily and hurled him, kicking and squirming, through the air at the approaching crowd. Two men went sprawling. Then the bung-starter caught Slim on the side of the head, and his stovepipe hat went sailing through the air. A ball of flame seemed to explode in Slim's brain; for a moment, the faces closing in on him were blurred as he swung a long arm around in a circular motion and jerked the bung-starter from the bartender's hands. He stood there for a minute or two, waving it out in front of him while his brain cleared. Red, who had been knocked down, staggered to his feet and shook his head groggily. "Boy, oh boy, let's get out of here!"

BUT NOW, Slim's blood was up and he had a strange thirst for battle. He saw a man approaching with an upraised chair, and stepped out toward him with the bung-starter, flourishing it. The man leaped in and Slim brought down the bung-starter. The handle crashed against the chair and broke; the other part of the bung-starter bounced against the wall. Slim was now unarmed, except for his guns and this was evidently not a gun-battle. He leaped furiously toward the crowd, swinging his fists. The crowd scattered and gave way before him; with Red behind him, he started toward the door. "On them, damn you," Wade shouted; "on them!"

Slim swung his long arms and he could feel his fists crash against solid

skulls. Men went down each time he struck; but then he could feel dozens of hands seizing him. His arms were pinned to his sides and he was lifted bodily. He kicked and struggled as best he could; but it was futile. He was hurled through space into the darkness, hurled from a saloon as a fake and a fraud. At the moment he could think of nothing more humiliating. Wade stood in the doorway and the light from the saloon streamed out past him. "If you two know what's good for you, start riding and don't look back at Twin Buttes; come in here again and we'll kill you!"

4

SLIM ASKED, "You hurt, Red?"

Red grinned in the semi-darkness. "Hell, no; how about you?"

"I ain't decided yet, I'm so mad," Slim arose stiffly, every muscle in his body feeling as if it had been stepped on by a horse. "I got a knock on the noggin that had me going for a minute. What shall we do now?"

"I don't know," Red responded. "I hate to take this sitting down."

"Well, on your feet then," Slim decided; "I'm about to commence. Do you still think that hombre is Glen Stoner?"

Red rose painfully to his feet. "Must be; else why would he get so tough with a couple of fellows like us? Sure is something eating him; no sense getting so upset over a couple of strangers."

"Before," Slim said resolutely, his anger swelling within him, "before, all I wanted was the bounty on his head. Now it's different; I've got a good notion to go in there and take him apart!"

"He'd probably kill you this time, Slim."

"There must be some decent men in there," Slim reasoned; "they didn't all try to kill us. He couldn't get away with cold-blooded murder."

Red was still reluctant to commit himself. "I wouldn't be too sure; but if you're going in again, I'll back you up."

Slim strode to the hitchrail and went from end to end, releasing all the horses but three. He quirted the others down the street. Then he went back and stood beside Red, unbuttoning his long-tailed coat as he did so. With swift, sure hands he drew his long-barreled Colts, tried their action, and returned them to their holsters. "As I said," he repeated, "I'm about to commence."

"Commence what?" Red asked. "What you got on your mind, Slim?"

"I don't know for sure yet," Slim said, in a voice husky with anger, "but one thing sure, I'm not taking this lying down. They can't throw Slim Picken out of no saloon and get away with it. Now...don't come right in behind me; wait until I'm in a ways, then step in with your hands on your guns. All I ask is that you cover me. Don't reckon anyone will shoot me as I come out; because I don't figger to come out alone!"

"You'll bring Stoner with you?"

"Right," Slim flung over his shoulder tersely, as he stepped into the saloon.

●

"Well, well," Wade sneered from the other end of the bar. "The Professor ain't satisfied; what the hell do you want now, Professor?"

"My skypiece," Slim responded. "Just came back for my skypiece."

"Why, sure thing!" Wade laughed. "Here it is!" He bent over Slim's stove-pipe hat and gave it a kick, sending it end over end into the air.

Slim reached up with long arms and snatched it out of the air. It was badly bent out of shape, dusty and crumpled. He kept moving closer to Wade as he tried vainly to straighten it out.

He dusted it with the sleeve of his coat. "Mr. Wade," he said solemnly, when but a step away from the man. "You shouldn't oughta done that; I don't like having a man kick my hat."

"Ah, my good man," Wade sneered, "and what are you going to do about it?"

"I haven't decided yet," Slim responded mildly, "but I'm about to commence."

Red was now inside the door, his hands on his guns. "Take it easy, everybody, and you won't get hurt," he warned.

WADE'S EYES lost their contempt and fear came over his face. He looked from Slim to Red in one quick glance; then his hand started for the shoulder holster concealed beneath his coat. The gun came out and exploded, but the bullet went through the roof as Slim's fist caught Wade on the point of the jaw. It all happened so fast, that the crowd was scarcely aware of the movement; then Slim caught the falling man before he struck the floor. Whirling around like a dancer, he tossed Wade over his left shoulder.

As if by magic, his long-barreled gun appeared in his right hand. Slowly, his eyes holding those of the crowd, he backed toward the door with his unconscious burden. Red was standing there, holding the crowd at bay with drawn guns. "Hold them just a minute, Red," Slim whispered as he went through the door. "Give me time to tie him on a horse. When I'm ready, I'll whistle."

But before he was quite ready, guns began to blaze inside the saloon. Red reeled out of the door, his guns answering. "Hurry, Slim," he gasped; "I'm hit!"

Slim leaped to the saddle and sent six quick shots tearing into the saloon doors to give Red time to mount. He could see that Red was having a hard time of it; but finally the other was sitting in the saddle, unsteadily. "Come on Slim," he called weakly. "Let's ride before it's too late." They wheeled their horses, and, leading the other with the unconscious Wade tied across the saddle, they galloped out of town. Shots ripped into the night behind them, but they were already out of range.

•

For no particular reason, they were headed out of town over the same route they had come into it; near the point where they had been stopped by the two gunmen, Slim pulled off to the side of the trail. It would be some little time before the men could recapture their horses and organize a pursuit.

Slim removed his coat and, with a certain satisfaction, ripped off the irking collar. He then removed his white shirt and bound up Red's wound, which was high on the left side of his chest. "I'm afraid you'll be a mighty sick man, Red. First chance we get, we'll have to find a doctor. That slug went in; but it didn't come out."

Red tried to sound cheerful, "Once the bleeding stops, I'll be all right. Anyhow, I gave them as good as they sent; at least two of them won't be riding against us."

"That's bad, though," Slim responded worriedly. "Without Wade to lead them, there wouldn't be much reason to chase us; but with a couple of them shot, probably their friends will take it up. I reckon we'd better put as many miles as we can between them and daylight. They can't cut our sign until then, and by that time we'll have a chance to look over the lay of the land. We was a couple of fatheads blundering into a town without figuring on the lay of the land."

"I wasn't expecting to run into Stoner at Twin Buttes," Red defended lamely. "I just hoped we'd pick up his trail, and maybe pick up a few dollars with our little show."

"Well—no use crying about it now, I guess. But I'll say this much: We're in a hell of a position. No grub and in

a strange country. One of us wounded, and we've got a prisoner on a flea-bitten horse; will slow us up, considerable. Ten, maybe fifteen, hardcases on our trail, too. What do you reckon it would be best to do?"

"Like you said," Red agreed, "we'd better travel as far as we can between now and daylight. Maybe something will work out. If you'll give me a hand, I'll hit the saddle."

THE MAN tied across his horse began to struggle and Slim strode over to him. "What's the matter Wade?" he asked, tauntingly. "Tired of riding on your stomach?"

For answer Wade let go with a string of curses; he was expert at that sort of thing. And Slim resented it. "Shut up," he ordered, "or I'll shut you up." He twisted Wade violently around in the saddle, tied his feet beneath the horse's belly, then tied Wade's hands to the saddle-horn.

"Where you taking me?" Wade asked, in a more conciliatory tone.

"To be hung, probably," Slim responded.

"They'll never hang me; first thing, there's no proof I killed anyone; second, I've got enough money to hire a good lawyer. I'll go free."

"You won't admit murder, then?" Slim kept probing, honing to get the man to admit something while excited and resentful.

"No, I won't admit anything," Wade growled. Again he let go with a string of curses.

"I told you not to do that," Slim advised angrily. "Now I'll shut you up for awhile, and maybe you'll think twice before you start swearing around me. What's right and proper for a mule skinner ain't becoming to a man of your caliber; you should know better."

It wasn't any scruples about Wade's language that prompted Slim to do what he did; he believed that he had heard the sound of approaching riders. Quickly, he thrust a piece of his shirt into Wade's mouth to make a gag.

"Grab your horse's head, Red," he said softly. "I think I hear someone coming; I'll take care of these two."

Pulling the horse's heads together he held their noses with each hand; it was rather awkward going; but neither horse made a sound as the riders passed on down the trail.

Wade had worked the gag loose, and was yelling for help.

"Shut up," Slim ordered, "or I'll shut you up."

"Help—over here!" Wade shouted again.

Slim's fist arced up and caught Wade on the point of the jaw; the other went limp. "I hate to hit a defenseless man, Mr. Wade, but you're asking for it.... Wait a minute Red; let me help you. I don't want you to open up that wound and get to bleeding again. I think they heard Wade holler, and they'll be back here. We'd better make tracks. Keep your eye peeled for the North Star; we'll go as straight as we can in a northwesterly direction."

•

DAWN FOUND them before the lofty shoulder of a mountain that rode abruptly into the sky. It was rough country, the hills denuded by erosion; but in the ravine was a spring surrounded by willows and a thick growth of sage brush. To the southeast was the rugged, but more flat, land over which they had come and where Slim expected pursuit. It was possible to see for considerable distance over their backtrail from where they were; Slim decided that this was a good place to make a temporary camp. The horses needed rest and the grass was good. Red needed rest, also; his wound was now beginning to stiffen and cause him pain.

"Just relax and get some sleep if you can," Slim advised, as he laid out Red's saddle-blanket with the saddle for a pillow. "I think I saw a jackrabbit there in the brush. Before I could afford to buy ammunition, I was pretty good at killing rabbits with

rocks. Don't dare shoot one because of the noise."

"Don't think it would make much difference," Red opined. "Looks like this is the only water in miles; they'll naturally come here, first thing. Best that we take a little rest and then push on."

"If it wasn't for that flea-bitten nag we got for Wade," Slim said gloomily, "or if we didn't have him along at all, I believe our horses could outrun anything in this part of the country. I sized up their mounts when we hit town; didn't see anything that I thought could stay with us."

He strode into the sagebrush and began looking from side to side. He was like a long, hungry hound as he stalked something in the sage and let go with a rock, two or three times. "Damn," he said softly. "Missed him."

Then, impatient with such primitive methods of hunting, Slim drew his pistol. A young jackrabbit dashed out from behind a bush and the gun exploded. The head was shot completely off as the heavy slug found its mark.

"Anyhow," Slim grinned as he returned with his prize to the camp, "we'll have a little something to keep us from starving." Soon he had cleaned, washed and spitted the rabbit over the fire.

Wade, who had been sitting tied to a tree, watched with fear-filled eyes. He said nothing; but when Slim had the rabbit cooked and untied his hands, Wade ate hungrily. "You'd be right handsome if you'd shave, Mr. Wade. Would you like to do it yourself, or would you like to have me do it for you?"

WADE LOOKED at Slim, suspiciously. "What's the idea?"

"So we can see what you look like; maybe your face would look familiar."

"And if it does," Wade argued, "what would it be worth to you to forget you saw me?"

"That depends on Red; he's the one who'll have to be satisfied and now that he's asleep, I think I'll just go ahead with the shaving and see what we find out. If you're who we think you are, don't reckon any amount of money you'd be able to get for us would make any difference. Red's funny that way."

"If it's money you're after," Wade said, hopefully. "I've got a tidy sum laid back. Just between me and you, Slim, I'll give you five thousand dollars if you'll cut this rope loose and give me a break. Red will soon be out of his head with that bullet wound; he'll never know what happened."

"And how could you give me the money away out here?"

"I'd write you a check, and it would be good, too. If you like, we'll wait until we get to town and then I'll cash it myself."

"You think I'm the sort of gent who would doublecross my pard for a few filthy dollars?"

"Others have done it for a lot less," Wade encouraged. "Just think; at forty-and-found, it would take you a long time to get a stake like that. Why, in my own gang I've got six, seven men who would slit my throat for half of that."

"I don't doubt it; that's a tough bunch you ride with, pardner. How do you know they won't doublecross you?"

Wade smiled grimly. "Because I've got enough on each one to hang him!"

"According to that," Slim observed, "it ain't likely they'd be very anxious to come to your aid. The way I look at it, they'd be tickled to see you hanging by the neck from a good stout tree."

Wade's thin lips sneered. "No doubt. But as long as I'm alive, they'll do everything they can to keep me from going to jail. You see, it would be very embarrassing to them if I should talk. I know too much, and knowledge is power. You're a professor—or are you? Anyhow, you know that's true."

"No truer words were ever spoken," Slim agreed. "Trouble is, maybe you or I don't have the particular and specific knowledge needed. Anyhow,

I'm not a-going to argue with you anymore; I've got a soft heart and if I give you half a chance you'll talk me into turning you loose. Chances are, if I did, you'd slit my throat and Red's before you left camp. Nope, Mr. Wade, whatever Red says goes—and if he says we take you in so you can stand trial and be hung, that's the way it will be."

WADE DID not protest as Slim lathered Wade's face and slowly began shaving him. On the right side of the cheek, as the beard was removed, Slim finally made out a jagged scar. Recalling the description of Stoner, and the picture on the reward-notice, Slim decided that this scar must have been acquired since the picture had been made—or else, they had the wrong man. When he had shaved off more of the beard this doubt grew until he became impatient to know the truth. "You finish the job, Wade; here's a mirror. Go right ahead and shave yourself, and don't get any funny ideas about trying to escape; I shoot fast, and I don't miss!"

Wade took the razor and began shaving. Slim went over to Red and shook him awake. "Come on over here, Red, and take a good look at what we've caught; if I don't miss my guess, we've made a mistake."

Red was bleary-eyed, his face flushed from his wound, but he walked over stiffly and looked down at Wade for a long moment. Wade glared up at him then continued his shaving. Slim and Red walked thoughtfully out of earshot of the tied man. "Well?" Slim asked anxiously; "is he our man?"

"No, Slim," Red said huskily. "I'm sorry I put you to all this bother; we got the wrong one. I don't know who he is; but one thing is sure: He ain't Glen Stoner!"

"Well, then," Slim demanded. "What the hell will we do with him? If we turn him loose, he'll probably organize his gang and trail us clean to hell; he's that kind or I miss my guess. Kind of fanatical in the upper storey. If we try to take him with us, we'll probably be caught, anyhow. As a matter of fact, I thought I saw some movement down the valley, a minute ago; it won't be long and we'll be surrounded. The best thing would be to put a bullet in him and leave him lay; but I ain't got the guts to shoot an unarmed man."

"Me, neither," Red shrugged, "and I wouldn't rest at night if we just left him here tied to a tree to starve or die of thirst. You can't be sure whether his men would find him or not.

Slim turned toward Wade, he gasped out. "What do you know—he's gone and slit his own throat!"

Red shuddered and started for his horse. "Come on, Slim; let's ride. I'm in bad shape to look at such a thing as that; my stomach is all full of feathers. Damn you, Slim. What did you tell the poor guy that made him do a thing like that?"

"Well, we had a little argument about philosophy," Slim admitted in a slow drawl, as he flung Red's saddle on the horse and pulled up the cinch. "He didn't have much choice, really; at least I got him to agree on one point."

Red looked keenly into Slim's face. "And what was that?"

"Knowledge is power."

"So it is," Red agreed. "Now let me see you use some of it to get us out of this mess; I think we're surrounded."

5

A RIFLE-BULLET slapped the bushes, as Slim pulled their cinches tight and helped Red into the saddle. "Now this is what you do, Red," he instructed. "You drop back up this ravine and cut around the shoulder of the mountain. If you take it easy, they might not see you...then head for open country. Ride like hell and get in the clear; I'll stay here behind that big rock and stand them off."

"No, Slim," Red demurred, "I got you into this and I'm about done for. Let me stand them off, and you make a break."

"Don't be a damn fool; if you don't do as I say, I'll walk right out at them and I'll walk a-shooting."

Red licked his lips nervously; he shook his head as if trying to drive away dizziness. "Okeh, Slim, you win. I'll do as you say; but be careful." Another rifle-bullet zipped over their heads as Red turned his horse and bolted up the ravine.

Slim drew his revolver and snapped off six high shots in the general direction of the men who were stalking them, several answering bullets came too close for comfort. Slim leaped to his saddle, removed his rifle from its boot, then flung himself full-length behind the sheltering rock. The upper half of a man's body was revealed above a large boulder as the man took careful aim. Slim snapped off a quick shot and the sniper shot upward to his full height, then keeled over backward. For a few minutes there was complete silence, while Slim thumbed another cartridge into his rifle and reloaded his revolver. Then bullets began to pepper the rock in front of him, seeking out his hiding-place and singing death-songs as they glanced aside. Slim looked over his shoulder, and saw that Red was in the clear; he had circled back and was now heading for the open country below.

Inch by inch, Slim began to wiggle backward, toward his horse and the concealment of the willows. Bullets continued to pelt the rock and Slim thrust his rifle back into its boot. He began to speculate as to the number of bullets still in the guns against him, hoping that, in the excitement of the moment, they would not take time to reload. Being superior in numbers, they might be careless.

Now was the time to make a break. The shifting from empty rifles to six-guns, for use at close range, would throw them off-balance.

Then, as Slim peered through the willows in preparation to make his dash, a spine-chilling thing caught his eye. Red had circled back and was directly in front of him. Without apparent haste and with deadly deliberation he was calmly shooting his rifle. No wonder the firing had suddenly ceased; Red was drawing the fire toward himself!

WITH A WILD Indian yell, Slim leaped to his horse and leaning far forward, a gun in each hand, he streaked into the open. Bullets whined over his head, but he had the satisfaction of seeing men run for cover before his blazing guns. Some of them pitched forward on their faces and lay still; others snapped off quick shots, over their shoulders, as Slim bore down. Bullets seemed to fill the air, wild screeching bullets, most of them wide of their mark.

At first Slim was only vaguely aware that Red was coming toward him; then he realized that this must have been part of Red's plan all the time. It was Red's shots which had thrown their assailants into confusion, for he rode with both guns blazing and finding their marks. His stallion neighed a challenge in the clear, mountain air and was answered by the screams of wounded men.

Within ten yards of Slim, Red pulled up, his horse rearing and his guns clicked on empty cartridges. Slim's guns were also empty; but now there was no one to dispute the peace and quite. It was suddenly as if the place had turned into a graveyard. But the thing that would always remain in Slim's memory was the expression on Red's face as he came toward him shooting. There was that same don't-give-a-damn grin, that boyish recklessness; a certain quality of elation not of this world. It was the same expression Slim had seen on Red's face when Red had come to his rescue when the cattle had stampeded—that peculiar something which gets into a man when he forgets about himself and thinks only of another.

Red reeled in the saddle and his face went suddenly white; the wound

in his chest had opened, and fresh blood was staining the front of his shirt. *I've got to get him to a Doctor—and quick,* Slim thought, as he reached out a steadying hand to seize Red by the arm. *This makes twice he's saved my life. I can't let him down now!"*

●

It was daybreak, the following morning, when Slim finally approached a town—a peaceful, sleepy-appearing settlement with smoke curling lazily from chimneys into the crisp clear air.

"What place is this?" Slim asked a Mexican boy who was leading some milk goats in from pasture.

"Cottonwood," the boy responded, looking up at Slim in apparent awe.

"Got a doctor here?"

"Yes, sir; right down the street, Doctor Wilkins—in the building with the white front. *Mucho bueno Medico."*

"Thanks," Slim said worriedly. "My pardner needs a doc bad; see you later," he rode on down the street and pulled up before the false fronted building. *Funny thing,* he mused, as if this were an omen of trouble. *When we sent that badge, and my other clothes, to Cottonwood, it was just a spot on the map. I wrote Maw to send me some money here, too...never dreamed I'd end up here, though. I thought we'd have to send for our things.*

A bearded man stuck his head around the corner of the door on Slim's persistent knocking and Picken stepped back blinking. *My gawd!* he thought, *I must be seeing things. I didn't believe in ghosts, but it sure looks like Wade's ghost has come to haunt me. This must be a dream!*

"Come in, come in," the bearded man invited. "What's your trouble? Are you ill?"

"N-no," Slim stammered, striving to regain his composure. "It's my pard; he's been shot. Are you Doctor Wilkins?"

The man's blue eyes twinkled. "That's what they call me. Now, here—take a snort of this." He set a bottle of whiskey and a glass on the table.

Slim shook his head. "I don't drink."

"Don't be a fool," Doc Wilkins said, impatiently. "Man alive, you need a bracer." He poured the glass half-full. "Here now, down with it."

Slim gulped the whiskey and could feel it burning all the way down. It warmed him, and he saw that this was not Wade after all; this was a real flesh-and-blood man, and there was a kindly twinkle in the blue eyes. It must have been the beard which had given him the start. "My pardner," he managed, "is outside. We got to do something for him and quick."

THEY CARRIED Red into a back room, and Slim watched Doc Wilkins remove the bullet. At first, it was as if the doctor were removing the bullet from his own flesh; but after a while Slim forgot the operation itself to marvel at the doctor's hands. Strong and white and flexible, they seemed to be the hands of a magician as they worked. Such hands, skillful with the haemostat, the probe and forceps could be equally skillful with cards, and lightning with a gun. "You're mighty handy with your hands," Slim admired, when Wilkins dropped the bullet into a pan with a little thump. "You could be a big doctor in some big hospital back east, I'll bet."

Wilkins gave him a keen searching look. "Yes," he admitted. "I might have been. That was what my family wanted for me. I was rather—er—well, rebellious. Like a hard-headed horse I guess—you can lead him to water but you can't make him drink. They made the mistake of trying to tell me what to do. I like it here better."

"It's a shame to waste such talent in a place like this," Slim mused; "but then, I reckon you've got a reason."

"I have," Wilkins said curtly.

"Now I'll just give Red a little pill to sort of quiet him down for a while. You can sleep here in this room with him, and watch him when I'm not around. He'll likely be out of his head for a while. He's got fever, now, and he's lost a lot of blood. If you've got anything to tend to around town you can go ahead and do it; I'll look after him."

Slim was strangely reluctant to go, yet he could see no way out of it. Still...there was something about Doctor Wilkins which made him uneasy.

At the Post Office he got a letter from his mother containing nothing but money. He had addressed it himself, for her convenience, and now he wished that she could write—just a word or two to tell him she was well. There was also a package containing the things they had sent. Slim returned to the doctor's office, went into the back room and changed his clothes. Red was restless now and talking out of his head. Suddenly he sat up in bed: "Bang!" he shouted. "You're dead! Stick 'em up. You're under arrest!"

"HE'S A WILD one," Slim said with a grin, "always pretending he's a sheriff or something. Used to play with crooked sticks for guns, when he was a kid."

"I was rather wild myself, once," Wilkins said solemnly. "I guess everyone must sow his wild oats one way or another. I guess I was some worse than the general run—more high-strung, and the compulsion was greater. It's going to be quite a while before Red recovers—if he recovers. I've got some good books in here if you'd like to read."

"Thanks," Slim responded gratefully. "I'll enjoy that."

So the days passed, and Slim sat beside Red's bed and read the books from the doctor's library. There were times when Red was out of his head and revealed many things about his past, and there were times when Wilkins heard him. In fact, there were times when the doctor was alone with him and Slim had no idea of what Red revealed of his immediate past and his hopes for the future. All he could do was observe that the doctor often spoke sharply, as if under intense strain. While Slim sat relaxed, and intent on his reading, he sometimes felt the probing eyes of the doctor studying him. "I wonder what's eating him?" Slim mumbled to himself. "There was something mighty funny about him the first day I saw him."

Sometimes the doctor was out on calls; but it was evident that he did not have much business; the community was naturally healthy. One day, two children brought a puppy with a broken leg; Wilkins set the bone and splinted it with all the care he would have used on a human. The children had brought a dozen eggs in payment for the doctor's services, and Wilkins received them with thanks and a warm smile. It was evident that the returns for his services in this isolated place, must be poor indeed. "Looks to me," Slim probed one evening at supper, "like doctoring in a town the size of Cottonwood would be a mighty poor business. I don't see how you make a living at it."

Wilkins leaned back in his chair and lighted his pipe. "I don't," he admitted. "It's funny how a man looks at things. If he *has* to do it to make a living, sometimes it becomes irksome; but if he does something for a hobby, it can be a pleasure. With me, this medical practice is a hobby—I don't worry about the money I get out of it."

"You have an independent income, then?"

"I know what you're thinking," Wilkins said gravely. "But what you're thinking ain't so. Maybe the money I get ain't exactly honorable, like as if I earned it; but it isn't from crime. I'm what they call a remittance-man."

"Remittance-man?" Slim repeated. "I don't get you."

WILKINS seemed slightly embarrassed. "Well, put it this way.

Back in Boston, my family is highly respected—snobs if you want the straight truth. They have a position. Father is a brilliant surgeon, and I was supposed to follow in his footsteps. It was his dream but I raised so much hell, brought them such disgrace that they were glad to be rid of me. My younger brother, with half my talent is a fair-to-middling doctor. Naturally, he doesn't want me around to show him up. They have agreed to send me three hundred dollars a month so long as I don't go back to worry them. It's a great life, Slim, if you don't weaken."

"And you spend most of your income taking care of the sick and needy," Slim summed up. "I've been around town; I've heard people talk."

"I get more money than is necessary for my needs," Wilkins went on. "I've got to spend it, somehow, and what could be better than on medicines and food for those who can't afford them? Anyhow, I'm not all saint; once in a while I get drunk and raise general hell. Shoot out the street lights; have a saloon-brawl; break up the furniture, and scare the daylights out of some of the kids. I've done it so often that the kids don't get scared any more."

"What's your object?" Slim asked shrewdly.

Wilkins grinned cunningly. "Every time I do it, I get a lot of publicity," he explained. "The papers are full of it and I see that they get all the details. I send those papers home, so the folks can shake their heads and feel horrified. Whenever they get one of those papers, they send me two checks instead of one—to be sure I won't come home. I throw a whingding whenever I have any special need of money—run out of drugs, or have an epidemic, or the like."

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Red came out of the shadows, gradually. His mind was clear, now, his observation keen, and he slept with his gun beneath his pillow. Slim saw

this and wondered; something which he had suspected, and rejected in his mind—a hint of suspicion which would not be stilled kept nagging at his vitals. The question was, what was Red going to do about it.

The answer came abruptly, one afternoon, when Slim returned from a stroll around town. He could feel tension, the moment he stepped into the room. Doc Wilkins was standing by the open window, smoking, his foot resting on a chair. Idly he was whirling his watch fob on a gold chain with his right hand. His coat was open at the front and he had a gun in a shoulder holster within easy reach. Each time his hand whirled the watch fob it came up close to the butt of that gun. "Which one of you gents," he asked casually, "is the owner of that U. S. Marshal's badge?"

Slim looked into Wilkin's eyes, then flashed a quick look at Red, who lay stiff and tense on the bed. He saw Red's hand creep toward the gun under his pillow, then stop. Slim's own hand hung scant inches from his holstered weapon. The right hand of the doctor kept whirling the watch chain.

"Why, shucks, Doc," Red grinned, and relaxed. "That badge belongs to me; ain't no authority to it; I just picked it up along the trail."

"You lie," Wilkins stepped toward him and his voice was harsh. "You've mumbled it in your sleep; and you've made it plain who you're after. Well,

you've come to the right place. I'm your man; I'm Glen Stoner!"

RED'S EYES opened wide as he looked into those of the doctor. "I'm sorry you said that, Doc. I was just wishing I could ride on, out without knowing the truth or mentioning it. You saved my life; I'd be a hell of a guy to turn you in for the bounty."

"But there's more to it than that," Wilkins persisted. "Every man has his job to do; you have yours. You took an oath of office when you got that badge. A man can't go back on his word."

"But he took no oath," Slim stepped forward and looked solemnly into the doctor's eyes. "He's got no more authority to make an arrest than you have. I've been watching you; I believe you are trying to do the right thing. What's past is past. Just forget about that badge."

"I'll go peaceable," Wilkins decided, still not convinced. "I knew it would come—sooner or later, and I'm tired of running away; it might as well be you two who take me in as some one else."

●

Slim and Red were strolling down the main street of Cottonwood. Red's strength had not completely returned, but he was now able to be up and about. "The doc was hard to convince," he grinned, "but when he shaved off his beard I knew we had him satisfied."

"Yeah; now what do we do?"

Red said nothing but turned into the doorway of the Town Marshal. He pulled out the U. S. Marshal's badge and laid it on the desk. The old man's mouth popped open and he looked up at Red and Slim in awe. "W-what can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"I was just wondering," Red said casually, "if you have any reward notices. I'm looking for a man, and there's a detail or two on which I'd like to refresh my memory."

"Yes, sir!" the old man responded eagerly. "Right here. I get all the notices through the mail, and I keep 'em right here handy; look them over gentlemen."

Red took the reward notices and fumbled through them with clumsy shuffling hands. He pulled out one. "Look here, Slim, what do you make of this? Look what we passed up."

Slim peered over Red's shoulder and the scarred face of Wade looked back at him. *"Five thousand dollar reward for Ed Rainer, dead or alive,"* he read.

"If we could have brought him out," Red murmured, thoughtfully, "we could have got a nice piece of money for him—even if he did slit his own throat."

"Yeah," Slim reminded sarcastically, "but if we'd tried it we'd probably have a hard time spending that bounty in hell."

Red turned to the Town Marshal. "Thanks, old timer; see you later." He turned on his heel and they left.

They were still casually strolling along the street when Red handed Slim a reward notice. "Filched it from the Town Marshal," he said with dancing eyes.

Slim looked at it and tore it into small pieces then tossed them into the breeze. "That's what you wanted to do with it, didn't you Red?" He asked as he watched them float away and scatter.

Red grinned. "There's no picture of Glen Stoner around, now. Didn't want to take any chance of anyone here recognizing him. It ain't a good idea to have a bounty notice, with a man's picture on it lying around; there's just a chance that old man would recognize him."

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know," Red responded. "Anyhow, as Bounty Hunters we'd make better sheepherders." And with that he tossed the U. S. Marshal's badge into a bush.

★

We Pointed Them East

THE LONGHORNS had been trailed north out of Texas, and now they grazed on Wyoming grass. They were bony critters—with long horns and very little tallow; down in West Texas, they had existed by eating mesquite beans and sparse bunchgrass.

A Wyoming cowman and a cowboy rode around the herd. "Those are poor cattle, Jim," the cowman said; "too bad we can't get good stuff to graze on this good grass."

"I saw plenty of good cattle over in Oregon, boss. They were Shorthorns and Durhams, an' they was as fat as butter-balls; had good bones and lots of meat on them bones, too."

"Oregon cattle could be trailed into Wyomin', Jim. How long would a trailherd out of Oregon be on the push?"

"About a summer, I reckon, if a man and his crew got over there early in the spring; these Texas cattle ain't hardly worth feedin'."

"A man can't make no money on these Texas steers. By the time fall comes, they ain't got no fat on them because they've spent a whole summer on the trail. The cows throw poor calves and are hard keepers. We're goin' to trail in some of them Oregon Durhams, Jim."

"Be quite a chore, boss."

Jim had made no overstatement. Within the next two decades, thou-

sands of head of Oregon cattle were to be trailed east—to pour out in a flood of beef upon the grasslands of Wyoming and Montana. Texas cattle, refused by the cowmen, went into Kansas, there to be shipped via rails into the midwest to devour corn. Montana and Wyoming—up to this time plagued by poor-blooded Texas Longhorns—soon had a good breed of cattle—steers that had frame enough to carry lots of tallow, and could better fight the terrible northern winters.

Also, Oregon cattle, being miles from a market, sold at a lower price than Texas longhorns.

•

In 1879, the Andy Carr bunch—mostly Texas cowboys—left Cheyenne, Wyoming, for Oregon. There were 26 cowboys in the group; they left in March, riding the rails to Ogden, Utah, then they trailed overland to Baker City, Oregon, where they road-branded a herd of over five thousand head of cattle. Then, with the new brands on the steers, they pointed them east.

For beef cattle, the trail-time was usually from seven to eight months. Cows and calves, of course, required longer; it usually took about twenty months to move them from Oregon to Wyoming or Montana. This meant that they had to be wintered enroute, which necessitated hay and a winter camp. That, too, ran up the cost of transporting the beef.

EASTWARD the cattle moved, a long line of bovine backs. Dust, ground into a powder by cloven hoofs, hung against the calm Idaho sky, marking the trail of the cattle to a new grazing-ground. Their ceaseless bawling was a low sound against the immensity of the mountains, and it lost its identity in the loud roaring of the Snake River, coming down madly out of the mountains to the north.

It was a trail of some danger, of course—danger from Indians, who had recently lost their buffalo to government hunters, and who wanted some "*Whoa-haws*" for beef; danger from the elements—the wild lightning-storms that would stampede even a trail-tired herd; danger from rivers that had to be forded, the cattle swimming in a long, bending line.

When buffalo became almost extinct, the Indians were desperate. Sometimes they scattered trail-herds, shooting down running cows the way they used to shoot down buffalo. They got the name "*Whoa-haws*" from listening to bull-train skinners calling "*whoa*" and "*haw*" to their oxen.

"Me want *whoa-haw*, cowboy."

Jim said, "What about it, boss?"

"Cut him out a fat steer, Jim; we don't want no trouble with him."

So the buck got a big Shorthorn steer. He rode close; the steer started to run and the buck shot him through the heart with a Winchester rifle. Then his squaw started to work with a skinning knife. Usually she split the hide down the back and made it two sections, for this way she could handle the green hide more easily. It was beyond the dignity of the buck to help her at such a menial task. When the herd went by he lifted his hand solemnly to the ranch-owner.

When the trail-herd reached Fort Hall, Idaho, the trail then branched into two distinct sections. The Northern Trail crossed into Montana Territory over Monida Pass—a name coined by the union of Montana and Idaho. Then this trail went to Virginia City—the old gold-mining camp—finally following the Gallatin River to the Yellowstone, where cattle were either turned south into northern Wyoming, or allowed to find a home-range on Montana grass.

By this time, Jim rode a tired horse. The entire "cavvy" would be tired; cowpunchers would be looking forward to riding into the "home-

ranch", and winter's coming was heralded by a cold northwest wind. Cowboys wanted roofs over their heads; they wanted to sleep in bunks and not in tarps on open range.

Fall was on this rangeland—cottonwood trees were golden of leaf, boxelders slept in colored glory, and on the high timbered ridges the pines were eternally green. Winter was close at hand.

"Sure glad to be home," Jim told his boss.

His boss looked at the Oregon cattle, now somewhat gaunt by their long drive. "A new future is ahead for Wyoming and Montana, Jim."

And the boss was right.

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The second trail coming out of Fort Hall went south—one section following the old Oregon Trail through South Pass, Wyoming, and the other swinging north a few miles, going through Big Piney. Both sections joined in southwestern Wyoming —just east of South Pass—where the trail wended down the Sweetwater River to the North Platte.

Some trail-herds numbered as many as twenty-thousand head; others were as low as five or four thousand. Many times, the smaller cowmen grouped their resources and cowboys, and pooled their outfits to drive Oregon cattle east. A fat steer on Oregon grass sold for about sixteen dollars.

During the two decades, the drives listed thousands of head of Oregon steers, and cows and calves came into Wyoming and Montana. Far superior to Texas cattle, they wintered well, usually coming off open range in the spring with a little surplus flesh—a thing Texas cattle did not do.

After being fattened on native grass, the cattle would be shipped to Kansas City for slaughter, the next fall, for the rails were going into the northwest. Only steers and old bulls were shipped for beef; cows were kept to replenish herds. Calves were

kept because at that time, the market for veal was very limited.

STARTING about 1880, settlers came into Nebraska, following the rails of the Union Pacific, and cowmen retreated slowly before the plow and barbwire and the windmill. Some of them went out of business, for the cowman could not, at that time, exist without free range—government land over which he grazed cattle. Others retreated ahead of the farmers going into Montana and Wyoming.

Sometimes this retreat was accomplished without bloodshed; other times cowmen tangled with "nesters", and usually the cowmen lost. A westward migration was going on, and nothing could stop it.

As a result, the ranges in Montana and Wyoming became overstocked, and the terrible winter of 1886-87—with thousands of cattle dying before blizzards—put some cowmen out of business. With the coming of 1890, the Oregon cattle-drives were just about a thing of the past, and the cow-raising business became more stable, with cattle grazing on forest reserves and deeded land.

"Twenty odd years," Jim said sadly, "an' it was over. All gone, men—all over."

"How come Oregon have so many thousands of head of cattle, Jim?"

"They came over the Trail, son. Once in Oregon, they multiplied and herds grew; but they were originally all middle-west and eastern cattle—shucks, some went out there with

yokes on, pullin' the wagons of the settlers. She was a great trail while she lasted, but she didn't last long."

Jim sucked on his old pipe. Up in the pines a magpie scolded raucously—a gaudy black and white scavenger of the range. Smoke lifted upward from the old pipe—smoke that moved and spread in the calm Wyoming evening-air. And the eyes of old Jim—faded and watery—watched that smoke.

Did he see them again—cattle, cattle, cattle? Herefords and Durhams and Shorthorns, swimming the wild Snake river, their backs wet from the spray, the roaring of the river loud in his ears as he pointed the herd, his bronc swimming with powerful strokes? Did he see cattle moving across the Idaho lava beds, their bawling low, the dust of their passing a high cloud against the sun?

Who knows?

★

The Decision

by Ben Smith

This man Dossett represented no threat to Snider; the sheriff knew he wouldn't be hard to handle. But having to do the job was a new problem in itself, and the unfamiliar part made the rest all the more difficult. For Mary was in love with Dossett . . .

THE SHERIFF faced this problem, as he had faced many in the long years past, with deliberation. There could be no mistake; the telegram from a law-enforcement agency farther east was plainly worded: Lance Dossett was the man they wanted. The description tallied closely, even to the oddly-quiet black eyes. The age, general appearance, even personal habits. Sheriff Snider slipped the telegram in a drawer of his desk where he kept his well-oiled, but little-used, guns and stood up.

"Trouble, Sher'ff?" It was Shorty Parnell who asked the question. Shorty, with a deputy's star pinned upon his broad suspenders, was propped back in a cane chair by the open door.

"I was thinkin' mainly of Little Mary," Snider said. "You don't ever know what a kid'll do."

"She's eighteen, Sher'ff."

"I know." Snider sank wearily to the door sill, bracing his broad shoulders against the jamb. "The wrong age." He mused a moment, watching

Myrtle Snodgrass swing her hips past the punchers loafing in front of the *Red Dog* saloon. There was another problem, he reflected, but one as old as humanity itself. And, Myrtle was extremely likeable, with a heart as big as Montana.

"There's a reason for everything," Snider told Parnell. "Even her." He jerked his thumb toward Myrtle who was now talking to a lone man near the watering trough. "Somewhere, down in people, is a foundation just like under a house. It's just as hard, too; it's the thing that they build on..."

His voice trailed off, his mind seeking the answer to his own question. Where was the foundation for Little Mary's openly avowed love for Lance Dossett? True, Dossett was a gentleman of sorts, with a high polish; he could very easily be the sort of man whom a girl might want.

But, love...?

"What do you think about Lance?" Snider said casually, not looking up.

Parnell replied: "You know how I feel about Little Mary, Sher'ff; I'd rather not answer that."

"Pity," Snider said, "that Big Mary didn't live to raise her. Girl needs her mother, especially when she thinks she's in love. Me—I can't talk to her about the things she wants to talk about. Goddammit, Shorty. What am I going to do?"

Shorty Parnell built a cigarette, waited until he had shoved the tobacco-sack in his shirt pocket before he said anything. " 'Pears you're between the devil and a witch. If she loves Lance, an' you arrest him and send him back East, her heart'll break; if you don't go after Dossett, you'd better unpin your star. Just one thing, though: People eighteen years old, Sher'ff—they bounce. Like rubber. One minute the world seems like it's about to end; next, it's sunrise time again."

Snider got to his feet with a characteristic flowing motion. "Thank you, Shorty," he said, his boots clumping on the rough boards of the walk. "I got me an idea; I'll see you directly."

Snider knew that Parnell would watch him out of sight and could almost hear the thoughts in Shorty's mind.

Too bad Missus Snider didn't live, like the Sher'ff said. Big Mary would a-known what to do...

SNIDER spoke courteously to Laura Garson. Considering her profession, he was even more courteous than her sex demanded. She was still by the watering trough talking to a red-faced Willie Hopkins. Willie looked up but did not speak.

"Only a matter of time," Snider said to himself. Someday, he would have to do something about Laura. It seemed strange that full-grown men had to be protected...

His thoughts came again to his own daughter, Little Mary. For years, during Little Mary's childhood, there had been the three of them; then, pneumonia, and Big Mary was gone. There was something of her left, though; her beauty and her laughter living again in Little Mary. That, and the granite stone that marked the grave.

Whatever you do, his mind said to him, *do with deliberation. Base your decision upon the concrete that is deep within you. There is an answer; find it.*

It was growing dark when Sheriff Snider found himself at the shacks that marked the village limits. He could smell suppers cooking, the odor of meat and vegetables mingled with the pungency of the cedar and the sage. He had left the boardwalk and his boots were now skimmed with dust from the road. It was the moment of silence, when the sun first drops behind the mountains and the meadowlark is still.

Snider turned at the cemetery, ignoring the crude wooden crosses that marked Boothill, to his right.

He passed them, going on to where the few granite monuments stood ghostlike in the twilight. There was one monument, apart from the rest and, even in the darkness, Snider knew that a living rose grew beneath it.

"I've come," he said simply. "Big Mary, I got something for us to talk over."

Silence was his answer. As Snider sat awkwardly upon the grass, a faint breeze came from between the stones and fanned his tired face. He took off his hat and felt his iron-grey hair move against his cheek.

"It's about Little Mary," he said. "Her and Lance. You'll remember, I told you about them. Now, I got to go after Lance; it's my duty. But I don't want to break Little Mary's heart..."

He waited, listening to a hound back in the village. Bently's old redbone, baying at the moon. Once he thought he heard the sound of cautious footsteps, then decided that it had been the dead leaves, moving with the wind. Suddenly calm, Snider waited by his wife's grave, full of the knowledge that the answer would come. He came here often, the sheriff did, to be with Big Mary. It was even said that a man who spent so much time with the dead was no longer fit to be an officer of the law—that the death of Big Mary had affected his mind.

Snider chuckled, holding the sound in his big chest. There were lots of things a man might learn if he had the patience to wait for the answers to his questions. Even this.

Little Mary was eighteen and, at the same age, her mother had been married. Seemed like, at eighteen, a girl must know her own mind and heart. Still...a man like Lance Dossett....

There was a polish to the man that must have come from conflict with the world. An honest man, keeping to his own business, never acquired such a gloss; Lance was like a rock that had tumbled about in the bed of a stream, endlessly jousting with other rocks for an advantageous position. And, according to the telegram, Dossett was wanted for murder...

SNIDER straightened, wondering if the sudden catch in his chest was rheumatism. He stared off into the inky blackness under a few spindly cedar trees and waited.

"I got to do one thing or the other," he whispered. Absently he rubbed the star upon his shirt. For years it had been pinned there, since the village had been a place of ten houses. Now, there were forty and a hotel. Seventeen years, Snider remembered—almost Little Mary's entire lifetime.

"My daddy is the sheriff."

Snider said no more aloud, but rather talked in his mind to Big Mary. He knew that his indecision was growing stronger, that it was eating at something deep within him. Unless he decided, and quickly, he would lose the power.

Big Mary, he thought, *you have to help me make up my mind. I'm the sheriff, people expect me to do something.*

It seemed that, at the moment, Big Mary was with him. Snider could see her—as he remembered her, in that high-necked dress with the flounces. There was the distinct impression of dark eyes in the darkness, of red lips moving. The words came to him, drifting like smoke: "Yes...yes... now!"

Quietly he got to his feet and walked away, the vision gone. His imagination, certainly; the dead do not come back to us. Still, he had his answer; the decision had been made and duty had won. And it was no idle vagary of his mind that had caused this decision; it was something deep within him, the concrete upon which his soul had been built.

Or, had those soft words been real?

Bently's red-bone hound still bayed as Snider walked down the street that led to his office. It was quite late; Parnell would have gone home. Still, to get a man like Dossett, Snider needed no help.

He *knew* now.

It was like Parnell had said. Little Mary was only eighteen, like rubber; she would bounce. Besides, she must have a goodly portion of the courage that had been her mother's. There would come sunrise-time again for her; and Shorty Parnell, a good man, would be waiting, patiently.

Snider was almost happy as he unlocked the familiar door and went to his desk. He did not light the lamp; he needed no light for what he had to do. He opened the desk drawer and found the telegram, stuffing it in his shirt pocket. Then, his fingers touched his guns. His movements were sure as he buckled the heavy belt around his body, feeling the solidity of the full cartridge loops. The .44's sank solidly against his thighs, the barrels, in the open holsters, rubbing his legs.

The indecision was past. There was a lift in Sheriff Snider's step as he walked out, relocked the door, glad that Parnell *had* been gone. Shorty would have been cautious, would have advised waiting until morning. This thing had to be done now—while Snider was experiencing the first security of his decision. By daylight, Lance Dossett would be gone and Little Mary would be on the path, short for the young, that led to the healing of the heart.

"Thank you, Big Mary," Snider said softly as he walked to the livery barn to get his horse. And, it was just as well that he would never know that, back in the concealing darkness of the cemetery, Laura Garson was still whispering an impatient, "Yes...yes... now!" to a reluctant Willie Hopkins.

★

Did The Mob Want Billy?

by The Lawdog

INSIDE the railroad coach at Las Vegas were four guarded prisoners — Billy-the-Kid, Dave Rudabaugh, Billy Wilson and Tom Pickett. A mob, some of whom were armed with revolvers and rifles, were gathering around the train that was headed for Santa Fe. On the platform stood Sheriff Pat Garrett, ready for any trouble.

He made his speech to the mob. "I promised these men I would deliver them to the sheriff of Santa Fe County, or the United States Officer at Santa Fe, and I intend to do exactly as I promised. Now, if you people insist on trying to take them away from me, I can see only one thing for me to do—and that is to arm every one of them and turn them loose to defend themselves as best they may."

One of the mob shouted, "Let's go right in and take him out of there." As for Billy-the-Kid, all he said to Pat Garrett was, "All right, Pat; all I want is a six-shooter."

Sounds nice and dramatic, doesn't it, this attempt to save The Kid from the mob. Standard versions follow the above. However, Miguel Antonio Otero—former Governor of New Mexico—who was present at the scene has a different interpretation. He says the mob consisted of friends of Billy-the-Kid. They would have rescued him, lynched Rudabaugh, and killed Garrett.

★

Joey had shot his father, and was trying to escape over the mountains, in dead winter—an attempt which made strong men grow pale thinking of it. Only ignorance and desperation could drive anyone to try; but they'd driven Joey, now Digger swore to bring him back. He'd make a man of Joey if his father lived, and help hang the young parricide if old Silas died!

DIGGER JOHN'S MINE

By A. A. Baker

Desperation made the kid almost a match for Digger John.

THE MOUNTAIN town of Gold Run looked over a steep bank into the hydraulic mine. The Main Street, that hastened past the

false-fronted buildings, ran through lower town and disappeared into the Bull Jack Mine. It was a huge, open pit, surrounded by high walls, streaked with layers of a lost riverbed that had carried the muck of the Ice Age and satisfied the thirst of the Mammoths. The riverbed had been laid bare by the gold miners with their searching streams of captured water. The center of the mine-pit was cluttered by heaps of bypassed dirt-mounds that matched the walls—mounds sculptured by the roaring water into ghostly imitations of the pyramids.

Hydraulic mining in the tree-capped Sierras is rough, wet, back-breaking work. The mines around Gold Run were of gluey, red clay that defied the stubborness of the miners, as well as the monitors throwing tons of snow-water against the towering walls of curry-colored, gravel-dirt.

If the gravel was rich—and most of it was during that fall of 1856—the miners blasted and washed until the tailings slopped over the two-foot sides of the sluices. Men on day-wages drained nuggets from the ore-beds. They suffered drenching from the mountain water and clumped busily about in soggy clothes as long as their torturous work was paying off in the boxes. But Silas Drencher's Bull Jack mine dropped only colors in the riffles; everybody, from the tail-off men to the bullwhackers, was becoming completely disgusted.

Digger John slapped the stream of water against the bank and watched in disgust as a glob of iron-colored mud crashed into the earth at the foot of the face. He cuffed his hairy hands around his bearded face and shouted. "Shut off'n the water!"

High on the bank, a grayshirted line-tender twisted a valve and the monitor died. The tail-off men climbed out of the mud along the sluices, hoisted themselves out of the crumbling run-off ditches. The axemen halted their strokes; the buzz of the sawmill whined to a stop, and they gathered in front of the Blacksmith's shack.

"This mine's washed up. It ain't fair to be takin' a man's pay, throwin' water against a bank thet's all mud an' rock, without there bein' any gold." Digger spat hopelessly against a white rock.

The men nodded, glumly; with the mine shut down, it would be a long, cold, winter. But Digger John was the man who would know; he had been one of the first to hit California during the rush, had pioneered the hydraulicing ever since the dead-river beds were found.

The gold had been thrown up long before Columbus ever heard of America—a full, flowing river dropping gold into its bed for centuries. Earth eruptions had shattered the river, and raised the bed high into the mountains, twisted into little chunks. Broken like shattered stalks of candy. Then the centuries had covered the gold-bearing bed with volcanic ash, and the earth-pockets lay deep above the sand and gravel. The hydraulic hose was useless when you had lost the prehistoric riverbed.

Silas Drencher had lost it; only color was showing in his sluices. In losing the pay-dirt, he had lost the backing of the monied men who had carried his payroll, and his other tremendous expenses.

Digger John put it tersely. "Silas is busted, beat an' befuddled. We're giving up, washed out an' whupped. Come 'round to Dredger's saloon tonight an' yew'll be paid off. Yew men'd better spend the rest of the day makin' clean-up, but yew can bet yew won't take drinkin'-money out'a them riffle boxes." He picked his black coat off a nail behind the forge, and tramped off toward Gold Run.

THE BOX-LIKE office of Silas Drencher's New California Hydraulic Mines was tarpaper-covered, sitting like a black coffin, halfway up Main Street. Digger kicked open the

door and entered the dim interior; he waited until his eyes adjusted, then stared around the disordered room.

Paper littered the floor in front of the safe; a broken swivel-chair leaned drunkenly over the rolled-top desk. The glass leg knobs caught the weak light as Digger stepped behind the desk and stared down at the quiet form of Silas Drencher.

Silas was a small, proud man—proud of such things as his white linen shirt, that now seeped blood, leaving a crimson scar, dotted by white buttons. He wasn't dead, but his breath was weak and spaced like the chuff of a leaky boiler.

Digger John pulled the desk off the injured man, stepped to the door, and shouted to a passing miner. "Silas is hurt bad. Run for Doc Handy—might find him at Dredger's saloon." The startled man bolted up the street, and Digger returned to the injured mine-owner. "Bet'cha thet overweight son of his done this," he muttered.

Silas Drencher was carted off to one of the rooms in Dredger Dan's Hotel. Doc Handy, part-time doctor and full-time undertaker, hurried in with a black bag, and a pleased smile on his cadaverous face. Doc enjoyed the anticipation of his twin professions. He figured he couldn't lose; he could repair the victim or bury him—at approximately the same fee. Doc also dabbled in legal matters; but that was now a sideline since he had once mistaken a skunk for a kitten, and ruined his sight when he frantically sloshed his eyes with pure redeye.

Silas' wound had stopped bleeding and Doc dug around for the bullet until Digger turned away and cringed as the probe scraped against the slug. Doc chuckled when Silas screamed and twisted off the bed, onto the rattan-carpeted floor.

"That's real co-operation, Silas," he said. "Just keep on and you'll sure bleed to death." He held the forceps high, and Digger could see the slug.

"Don't see why Joey used a gun," Handy continued. "The boy is big enough to whip bears with a switch. Measured him once, to model a new coffin; that boy stands six-foot-four. He's better'n three hundred pounds of meat with the fat trimmed close. One of them kind of people with a hide thick enough to scratch a chinee match on." He half-glared at the shrunken form of Silas Drencher. "How's it happen that little men have the biggest sons, and the biggest wives always have the little husbands...?"

THEY GOT Silas back into the bed; once the wound was dressed, he could tell the story of the shooting. "It was about the mine..." The wrinkled face puckered in the pain of a father forced to criticize his son. "I'd made a signed authorization over to my brother, John Drencher; he's in Kansas City and holds better'n a third of the stock in the Bull Jack gravel mine. Wants to sell out..."

"Yeah, Silas," Digger interrupted gently. "Somebody always wants to sell. If a California mine don't make ever'body rich in the first six months... But, they's plenty left in thet gravelbed; we just got to find where it's gone. Yore options cover better'n two thousands yards both sides of where we're workin', an' with some development work, we can locate her.

"It's kind'a like thet tangle Doc, here, got into with thet skunk. Them critters can't fire if'n their feet ain't on the ground. So Doc thinks he's got the answer, loops a string 'round its neck, an' gets off'n the ground. Where Doc made his mistake, was not knowin' 'bout the other skunk; there he was, holdin' one skunk up in the air, then t'other skunk waltzes up and gets a full shot at him... It's like that with this mine of yours, Silas. We got hold of one pay-streak of gold, an' mebbe followed it without knowin' 'bout another one close-by."

Silas smiled weakly and continued his story. "I know, Digger. Anyway,

after I signed them authorizations to sell, I changed my mind and figured we'd look for the old channel higher up. Then, Joey..." The face puckered again and his words were liquid with tears. "Joey got mad; he still wanted to sell. We argued, and he shot me, then took off with the signed papers."

Digger's voice was mean. "Figgered maybe he'd head east to get the sale through 'fore the news of yore death reached brother John?"

"Must be what he had in mind." Silas turned to the wall and mumbled brokenly. "Let him go..."

"Best thing could happen," chuckled Doc Handy. "He'll get up in the mountains, in them snowdrifts, an' we'll find his bones next spring. 'Member once, another fella tried gettin' cross the mountains 'bout this time of year. Could still see the teeth marks on his shin-bones from them mountain lions. Et the marrow right out'a the bones; wasn't 'nough left to bury, so's we just made up a dummy out'a an' old pig carcass. Filled the coffin right nice." Doc slammed his black bag and left with a parting shot. "If the wound infects, Digger, call me right away. I got to grease them wheels on the hearse; she squeaked somethin' terrible last time."

Digger John eased his bulk onto the bed and crumpled the covers in a knotty hand. "Doc's about right. Thet boy'll die in the mountains; he don't know them. Guess somebody better get after him, even though he ain't fitten, for the struggle a man'll have to make to bring him out. Thet is, he ain't fitten now—but maybe he'll be a man 'fore I get him back. First, though, we gotta arrange for some money-backin' to keep the men workin'; they'll scatter fast unless we're able to pay wages."

He stepped to the head of the stairs and shouted. "Dredger Dan, come on up here!"

The saloon below quieted, then someone called. "What'sa matter, did Silas pass on?"

"No, Silas didn't pass on," growled Digger. "We got to talk some business with Dredger; get him up here."

THE FAT hotel-man waddled importantly from behind the bar, hooked a quart of whiskey and a couple of tin cups off it as he passed, and joined Digger and Silas.

"Here's what gotta be done, Dredger," began the big miner.

Dredger smiled the tight smile of a banker, when he finds a customer is short a payment and interrupted, "Don't yew start jabberin', Digger John. It's a very simple thing; I know'd all along about the poor take of the Bull Jack Gravel Mine. Lost the channel; ain't it know'd all over town? Want financial backin' to look for the channel somewhere's else, eh?"

"Yeah," answered Digger.

"They's only one way it can be worked." Dredger poured the drinks slowly. "Let yew have a stake if..."

Dredger's hand was steady, but his voice shook with avarice. "Give yew a stake: carry the payroll; buy powder—a full stake for two weeks, providin' yew find the channel in them two weeks. If'n yew don't, the mine'll revert to me. Full an' sole ownership; I'll take yore signed paper, turnin' over the stock of Silas Drencher in two weeks..."

Silas Drencher groaned. "Might be willin' to gamble on them two weeks, Dredger, but my Joey's lost somewhere's up in the mountains an'..."

"He's mighty worried," Digger snapped. "Now get out'a here yew danged blood-sucker." He whirled Dredger out of the room, shouting after the fat figure. "We'll take yore offer; if'n we don't find the channel in two weeks, yew'll get the mine—but we'll sure look hard for it. There's nobody in this part of the country I'd rather see lose out."

Dredger shouted in anger. "Yew'll never find it, an' my offer stands.

Two weeks from right now..." His words were cut off as Digger slammed the door.

Silas Drencher raised on his elbow and questioned. "If Joey's got those papers, how can I sign over the mine to Dredger Dan?"

"Yew sign another set," answered Digger. "I'll run Joey down, an' be back 'fore two weeks is passed. In the meantime, I'll get the miners started on the development work." He laid a friendly hand on Silas' shoulder and hurried out.

●

Digger John was one of the few men who had used the American River passes long before the gold rush. The trappers had drifted over the mighty Donner Summit in search of the gold that lay on the backs of the fur-animals. But, even these hairy buckskin men had not dared the passes in the winter months; it didn't snow down; it snowed crossways. Snow-drifts were then uprooted by the winds and thrown out in flour-particles, particles that ground through the flesh into the blood—until the heart seemed to pump icicles through the veins. A man's skin felt warmer than his underflesh.

Four feet of snow had been known to fall between sundown and dusk—snow to be whipped into a tornado of biting steel particles seeking to destroy every living thing that had the foolhardy courage to dare its challenge. The bacon in a man's pack would curl, and whiskey gather ice in the bottle. A man chewed the stiffness out of his buckskins upon awakening, before he could crawl from his blankets.

BEFORE Digger John had reached Mule Springs, the snow was waist-deep. He rested at Blister's saloon; gathered news of Joey; consumed a quart of redeye, and headed back into a howling storm. He circled Bear Valley and knew his man was lost somewhere in the rocky territory around Independence Lake. He was three days out and the trail freshened.

Digger could see the floundering marks of a tiring man; it was an erratic trail—one that told of a man who had thrown caution to the wind and was staggering heavily through drifts that might toboggan down clifts a mountain goat would hesitate to cross. Ashes of fires that had been built in exposed windy spots, where the wind would draw the heat out of the flames. Sloppy ice places where wet boots had rested too long. Digger pressed on steadily until he heard the muffled twang of a pistol-shot.

He worked his way higher on a hog-back and waited for the wind to gulp its breath, so he could locate Joey. A hundred yards away, stood the hunted man. He was staring around, frantically, and thumbing back the trigger of a Wells Fargo gun. The short barrel still spewed smoke and Digger grinned and climbed higher above his opponent. Rolling like a snowball, Digger heaved it over Joey's head, watched as the man whirled and fired another shot toward the sound.

Between cold lips, Digger shouted and the muffled words blunted out into the clearing. "Jest two slugs left, Joey." The snow drifted in again and Digger heard the other man's blurred shout of sheer relief.

"I'm here...here. Gawd! I didn't mean to shoot at you..."

"Then throw the gun down, an' I'll come in!" Digger called.

Joey Drencher was babbling as Digger clambered down the slippery drifts. "I thought you was one of those animals that's been trackin' me," he chattered; "didn't mean to shoot."

"Yew're gonna wish yew did shoot," growled the big miner. He closed the distance between them swiftly and laid a stinging cuff on Joey's reddened face.

The younger man staggered and whimpered. "Don't do that, Digger; I'll kill you!"

His words were smashed back into his blubbering mouth, as Digger crashed against him. Joey floundered under the blow and felt himself lifted to his feet and struck again.

"Thet's jest a start..." began Digger but his words were halted by a furious punch from Joey.

They matched up fairly even. Joey was six and a half foot of man, his three hundred pounds of weight were lithe; he carried little fat and put his back into his blows. Digger John was shaped like an iron-bound barrel, topped off with shoulders fashioned like a set of oxen-yokes. He was outweighed, but years of pioneering left his body half-rawhide and half sword-steel, encased with a skin like dried bullhide.

A good half hour passed, with minutes ticked off by the powerful blows of the combatants. There was little pain—just the shock of fist pounding against half-frozen flesh. Where blood was drawn, it oozed sluggishly from the younger man's face. His eyes puffed and the lips that lay back on his teeth were cut and puffy. The snow was trampled down into an icy mess as they staggered back and forth in the flailing room; wind tore into their aching lungs and condensed the steam from their heavy breathing. Sweat eked through their clothes until they both steamed like a heaving horse.

Gradually, the giant body of the younger man crumpled under the blows; finally he lay gasping in the snow and groaned through his cut mouth. "Can't get up...finish it off...let me lay..."

Digger hooted and glared down on his beaten foe. "I'm gonna take yew back, an' if yore father's died, I'm gonna hang yew. But first..." With rough hands Digger, ripped the boy's pack apart and extracted the authorizations..."we'll have to figger some way to get these back in a hurry. Now get on yore feet, 'cause we gotta make trail out of here 'fore we freeze up."

Awkwardly, the beaten man rose to his feet and stood swaying for a minute. Then, with a moan, he collapsed, again. "It's my leg; it feels all numb, like it was broke." Digger started at the ominous words and bent down—to find his head clasped in a headlock and hear the panting words of Joey snarl into his ear. "You'll never get out of this; you'l die with me."

DIGGER'S neck-muscles strained and his back arched with the strength of a grizzly until it brought himself and the boy to a standing position. His breath came in wheezes; the blood vessels in his forehead raised until they appeared ready to burst. He grasped his Bowie knife and slowly, inch by inch, brought it down then across the muscles of Joey Drencher's stomach. The edge of the blade went through the skin of the buckskin shirt, ripped the cloth beneath and edged into the flesh.

With a scream that blunted against the storm, Joey let go all holds and fell. Digger drew the cold air into his deflated lungs and stared down at the blood-soaked man.

With the skill of experience, Digger patched the stomach-wound, strapped a splint to the broken leg, and paused for breath. He kicked into the snowbank until he found some soggy wood and built a fire. Night swept in; he pulled the man close to the blaze, and set out into the darkness.

●

Four days later, the bartender of Blister's saloon at Mule Springs kicked the snow away from the storm-doors and peered out into the blizzard. He stared hard as he noticed a movement on the ridge overhead. A man was staggering down the slope. He carried a burden—a snow-encrusted burden wrapped tightly, and bound by ropes.

The bartender's shout brought the men from the steaming bar and they soon had Digger and Joey Drencher huddled near the stove.

The wounded man was still breathing, and was laid on a bunk in the back room. Hot whiskey was poured into Digger and the ice around his eyebrows and coat collar melted. His feet were planted in a tub of cold water and he grimaced violently as the feeling came back.

"D'yew think he'll live?" Digger finally questioned. "His leg's busted and he's got a cut in his belly."

"Might live," a trapper answered. "But looks like mebbe *yew'll* lose some toes an' a couple of fingers yoreself."

"Can't help thet," Digger frowned. "Hear anythin' from Gold Run lately?"

"Nobody's been through here since you went east, seven or so days ago," the trapper said.

"Hey, man wants to talk," came a shout from the backroom.

Digger pushed painfully through the crowd around the bed and looked down on Silas' son. "Th-thanks for bringin' me out, Digger. Didn't have to...don't see why you did..." Slow tears melted in the dark eyes. "I want to explain..."

"Never mind," the miner answered softly; "yew get well. I gotta head on, but once the storm lets up, I'll be back."

"If my father ain't dead..." A bloody froth formed on Joey's lips and he coughed. ..."tell him I'm sorry, an' tell him..." the wracking cough shook his huge frame. "Tell him...the mine ain't..."

The dying man struggled to a partial sitting position; his eyes were feverish as he clawed beneath his shirt and extracted a doeskin bag. It clanked as it hit the floor at Digger's feet and he watched Joey lie back in death. Digger's hands tore roughly at the strings and there, in his palm, lay nuggets the size of pigeon eggs. Then he reached down and pulled the blanket over Joey Drencher's head.

THE STORM had blown itself out. The snow was hard and glistened under a cold sun, and Digger was able to tramp the last forty miles in short order. His arrival in Gold Run was greeted by gloom from Silas Drencher who was now up. The news of the boy's death was accepted as justice by the men of the town, but they had lost hope of ever re-locating the missing channel.

Digger leaned heavily over Dredger Dan's bar and said morosely. "Pour her full up, Dredger."

"Hah! Lay yore money on the bar." The hotel owner was jubilant; another day or so and he would come into a mine with promises of riches he had never dreamed of. He knew the channel was close, and he would have years in which to find it. "Lay out yore money, onless yew ain't got any, then..."

"Course I ain't got any," snarled Digger. "The boys cleaned me out but they should'a left enough with yew for a few drinks."

"Nobody cleaned out the sluices," hooted Dredger. "Ever'bodys been so all fired busy doin' development work, they got coyote holes shoveled out over half the mountains." He plugged the cork back in the bottle and snapped. "No gold, no whiskey; get on yore way, Digger."

"Dredger, m'boy," Digger's voice carried the iciness of the wind over Donner Summit, "yore in the same position as the rat, jest 'fore he takes his first bite of the cheese off'n the trigger of the rat trap." He hit the bar with anger. "There's colors in the sluice boxes. 'Fore he died, Joey tried to say somethin' about the mine; mebbe we'll never know what it was, but again..."

He turned to the loungers in the bar. "We'll go down to the diggin's an' clean up them sluices. We'll start

at the head end an' we'll take them boxes apart an' burn the wood. We'll come back with enough dust to buy us a drink of this rotten redeye." He bristled his heavy brows at Dredger Dan. "I seen the last shovelful of dirt hit a pocket before!"

Silently, Digger laid Joey's bag of nuggets on the bar. He pulled the drawstrings and let the marble-shaped nuggets roll out on the polished wood. "I'm bettin'," Digger started, then broke off to add, "but why should I let you know...yet? We'll jest let you sweat about where them nuggets come from 'til we get back from the diggin's."

The men tramped down Main Street, slid down the mine bank, and gathered in the slush around the long string of sluice-boxes. They shoveled off snow and broke loose the ice covering the riffles. The chicken wire, under the riffles, was laid tenderly aside. Soggy burlap was laid gently over a wash tub and the black sand shaken loose.

"Nothin' but black sand!" The tail-off man's voice was bitter. "Ain't an ounce to a ton of it."

"Didn't figure there was none at this end of the sluices," Digger answered; "thet's why we been fooled. Seen it happen before. Big gold's too heavy to reach the tail-off box; it drops before. We been expectin' light gold, flaky stuff an' flour gold. Now..." he stamped off toward the head of the long line of sluice-boxes. "We'll try the head-end, where the rocks settle."

●

THE SUN was sinking as the men tramped out of the diggings and marched back up the slushy street. They carried several wash-tubs between them and staggered under the weight. The batwings of Dredgers' saloon was slammed open and the men entered.

"Dump the stuff out on the floor," ordered Digger. "There, by the stove, then fill them tubs with water." Dredger stared at the muck that soaked into the sawdust and screamed.

"Yore all crazy; clean up thet mess an' get."

"Thet's jest what we're aimin' to do—jest clean it up, Dredger, an' mebbe show yew how thet rat felt onc't he took a bite out'a thet cheese." Digger was laughing as he filled a mining-pan with the gravel and expertly dipped the pan into one of the water-filled tubs. He roiled the pan in a circular motion; his reddened fingers pried into the muck in the pan. The men hunched anxiously around. A gasp of delight erupted as Digger raised to show the results of his labors.

The bottom of the blackened pan was covered with nuggets the size of peas, and one egg-shaped nugget resembled a bed-post knob.

"*Thet's* what Joey Drencher was tryin' to say! Thet the gold was big," Digger whooped fiercely. "Thet it was big an' wasn't gettin' through the boxes; it was droppin' into the first box. We was figurin' it as light stuff, an' only watched the last box of the sluice."

"Hell!" a jubilant miner shouted. "We never *lost* the paystreak at all; we was jest gettin' into the big stuff." The men whooped until the blackened rafters seemed to harmonize with their echoes.

Digger John laid the pan silently on the bar. His voice was soft as down. "Dredger, yore money's gone down the sluice. We don't have to find the channel. We was right on her all the time." He whirled in a sudden spin and shouted. "*Look out!*"

Dredger Dan ducked, and Digger laughed with a roar. "The spring on thet rat trap jest sprung."

Cursing wildly, Dredger Dan reached for a bottle—an empty one—and hurled it across the room.

★

smell the blood of an englishman

An Off-Trail Story — by S. A. Lombino

As the last man in the patrol — the one with the musket — came under the tree, Johnny leaped suddenly . . .

Johnny's grandfather had settled here in California, but now it was New Spain, under the iron rule of Barbazzo. And there would be little joy for an Englishman here, now — particularly an Englishman who refused to pay taxes, and killed an official. So Johnny waited for the patrol to come after him; he'd have to settle with soldiers before he could ride out in safety, with Dolores . . .

SHE CAME to his hiding-place that night. He crouched between two huge boulders beside the Dolores River, watching her work her way down to him through the oaks. In the wan light of the overhead moon, he saw the perfect oval of her face, ripe with the crimson of her lips. She moved swiftly, padding her way through the trees, barefoot, as silent as any animal of the forest. She paused, jerking her head up and lis-

tening, and he held his breath until she started forward again. Then, when she was no more than three feet from him—when she was so close that he could see the rapid rise and fall of her breasts, could hear the ragged rasp of her breathing, smell the deep woman-smell of her, musky and rich like a drink of wine from a cold goatskin—he called out.

"Here, Ama." The whispered words knifed through the stillness of the air, then died on the mild breeze.

She was in his arms then, and his fingers sought the silky blackness of her hair, twined into it. He pulled her face back, kissing the hollow of her throat, feeling her own moist, breathless kisses on his cheeks. "Ama, Ama," he said, over and over again.

"Johnny," she whispered, "be quiet—please, please. They may have followed me."

He drew her down between the two rocks, his eyes and ears suddenly alert to any danger. With his arms around her, they sat huddled together in the shadowed cleft.

After a long while, he asked, "Well?"

Her voice was close to his ear. "He is dead, Johnny."

"Good," he said.

"Johnny..."

"I meant to kill him; I'm glad I did." He paused and added, "I may go back and kill a few more of them. That's just the way I feel, Ama; I may go back and kill the whole stinking..."

"Johnny, please." He felt her fingers on his arm, and lowered his voice. Overhead, the breeze shook the leaves, etching a lacework of shadows on her face as the moon shone through.

"What did Barbazzo say?" he asked.

"He said he will get you."

"Is that all?"

"He said he will get you dead."

He chuckled a little in the darkness. "Fat chance."

"He means it, Johnny. He has given his men orders to bring you in dead; he said you have committed a crime against Spain."

"Spain be damned," Johnny said. "Ever since Barbazzo built his fort here, I've heard nothing but Spain. Spain, Spain. It's coming out of my ears, Ama. I don't care..."

He felt the restraining pressure of her hand again, and lowered his voice. "I don't care if I never see another Spaniard again."

"I am a Spaniard, Johnny."

He smiled in the darkness and cupped her chin in his big hand. "You're *my* Spaniard; there's a difference."

SHE LOWERED her chin, and he sensed a stiffening of her body. "Ama," he said softly, "this is all wrong. It doesn't...it doesn't feel right since Barbazzo came; it's not the same, any more."

"I know."

"It's all wrong," he went on. "Or maybe I'm wrong. What the hell—San Francisco doesn't belong to me. One of my great-great-great-greats happened to settle here after deserting Drake's *Golden Hind*, back in 1579. He found his way north, took an Indian girl for his wife, and built the cabin I live in. What right does that give me to complain? We just took the land—the way the Spaniards are taking it now. But...but Barbazzo is doing it all wrong."

"Barbazzo is not a typical Spaniard."

"No, but he's in charge of the fort, and he controls every Spaniard in San Francisco."

"You shouldn't have killed his lieutenant, Johnny."

"No," he said sarcastically, "I should have allowed him to steal that horse; I should have allowed him to take a few cows while he was at it. Sure."

"You didn't have to kill him," she insisted; "he explained why he was taking the horse."

"A tax," he said. "A tax! Now why in holy hell should I pay a tax to Barbazzo? I was here long before Barbazzo even heard of San Francisco; my grandparents were here before Barbazzo was born. And I should pay him a tax? I'm sorry, Ama, I can't see that; not at all."

He kneaded the knuckles on his right hand, looking down at the blond hair that curled over the back, waiting for her to speak.

"And now you have nothing," she said. "Because of your foolish pride, you have nothing."

"I have my foolish pride," he replied, softly.

They were silent for several moments. She rose, then, and smoothed out her skirt, running her hands over her thighs. He felt the blood rush to his throat again—the way he felt it whenever he looked at her. "Will you come again?"

She looked down, and her lips were slightly parted. "I will, if I can get away. How long are you going to stay here?"

He shrugged. "I'll be going back, soon; I'm just waiting until this blows over."

Her face was serious in the moonlight. "This won't blow over, Johnny. Barbazzo is out to get you."

"We'll see," he said. He started to his feet, but she turned suddenly, and ran off between the trees.

He watched the whiteness of her blouse merge with the shadows. And then she was gone.

•

THE FIRST Spanish patrol came the next day.

He stood on top of the rock, his hand palm-outward before his eyes to shield them from the sun. He spotted them easily; their brightly-plumed hats stood out like beacons against the browns and greys of the countryside. He leaped down from the rock and drew his pistol from his belt. From a pocket in his breeches he drew forth a wad of cotton, rammed it into the muzzle. He shook a ball from the leather pouch at his side, and dropped it into the pistol after he'd poured powder from his horn into the muzzle. He rammed another wad of cotton after the ball, then sprinkled some powder onto the firing pan. Then he checked the flint and sat down to wait, his eyes on the fluttering plumes in the distance.

Out in the bay, the *San Carlos* lay at anchor, her sails furled. Johnny looked at the ship distastefully. He would never forget this year of 1775; he would always remember it as the year of the Spaniards He watched the plumed hats again, saw the dull gleam of silver on ornate bucklers and sword-handles. Some of them, he saw, carried muskets; that wouldn't be so good.

Idly, like a man counting his pigs, he estimated the number of men in the patrol. *Six,* he thought, *perhaps seven. Two with muskets. Each with a sword.* He would have to get the men with the muskets first. He watched their approach, thankful that one of the musket-bearers trailed in the rear.

He thought of his blond hair, and his hand went to his head unconsciously. Talk about beacons—they'd spot his shining crop of hair a mile away! His left hand went up to his right shoulder, and he tore at the sleeve of his shirt, ripping the seam. He gave a final tug and the sleeve jerked free, falling over the muscle of his arm. He unbuttoned it at the cuff, then pulled the widest part over his head like a cap. He knotted the portion that trailed down his back, fitting the makeshift cap tightly over his straight, blond hair.

They were closer, now.

Still leisurely, he loosened the dagger in its sheath at his waist. He eyed the trees around the twin rocks, picked one that offered a clear view of the approaching patrol, and climbed it,

limberly, after stuffing a large stone into the waist of his breeches.

He sat on a high limb, his back to the patrol, his head twisted over his shoulder so that he could still watch them. Beyond the trees, and off to the right, he could see smoke coming from the chimney of his cabin. He wondered idly who had built a fire, and a pang of jealously tugged at his mind. It was his cabin down there, and someone had built a fire in his fireplace. Probably Barbazzo. What right had another man to build a...

He was so engrossed in his thoughts that the closeness of the soldiers came as a complete shock. They were rapidly drawing near to the tree, warily threading their way through the underbrush. He could see the face of the man in the lead—a young face, clean-shaven, with a scar starting over the right eye and curving its way over a high cheekbone. The man with the scar carried a musket, and Johnny's eyes shifted down the curving line of men, counting silently. *One, two, three, four, five...only five.* They moved forward slowly, snaking between the trees, their eyes shifting to either side of them as they scanned the bushes. The man in the rear carried a musket, too; this was the one Johnny wanted.

HE REACHED for the stone tucked into his waist just as the patrol approached his tree. Quickly, he whipped back his arm and sent the stone sailing in a wide arc, throwing it into the trees far ahead of the patrol. He watched the stone cut through the air, hang for a moment when it reached the peak of its arc, then drop like a wounded bird into the trees.

There was a slight rustling as it touched the leaves; then it struck a twig. There was a loud snap, followed by more rustling, as the stone fell rapidly to the ground. It landed with a crash, and Johnny held back a chuckle as the men in the patrol began talking excitedly among themselves.

The scarred leader passed beneath Johnny, heading for the source of sound. He began to count them as they filed past beneath him, evenly spaced. *Two, three, four...*

He held his breath after the fourth man ran past, then loosened his grip on the limb, hoping he'd timed it correctly. He dropped quickly, legs widespread as the fifth soldier—the one with the musket—appeared below him. He felt the thud of his thighs against the soldier's shoulders, felt the slight resistance, and then the buckling under his weight.

The man opened his mouth, and Johnny clamped a hand over it. His eyes flew to the backs of the others in front of him, as he reached for his dagger. His hand moved up quickly, a metallic blur, then descended once, twice, soundlessly. He felt the body under him give a last spasm and then collapse limply. He kept his eyes fastened to the other four.

They hadn't turned, hadn't heard a thing.

Quickly, he picked up the musket, snatched the pouch of shot that hung at the dead man's side. He loaded, put a sprinkle of powder into the pan, then cocked it.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey you!"

They all turned together, shock and fear blending on their faces. He brought the musket up, aimed at the man with the scar, triggered off. The scarred leader tried to raise his own musket, managed to get it to his shoulder when Johnny's ball ripped into his chest. A bright red flower opened on the silk of his vest, spreading thin tendrils across the bright yellow. The man dropped his musket, clutched at his chest, then crumpled to the ground, his plumed hat tilting at a ridiculous angle.

Two down, three to go, Johnny thought.

The remaining soldiers stood stock-

still as Johnny reloaded; they seemed frozen to the spot, incapable of motion. Then, as he lifted the musket again, they darted for the bushes on either side of the narrow path. Johnny triggered off a shot at the two men who ran toward the right side of the path, figuring his chances would be better with two targets. One dropped to the ground, smashing into the bushes, his head thrown back in a scream. Hastily, Johnny reloaded.

It was then he noticed that the other musket was gone; his eyes quickly travelled over the ground beside the fallen patrolman who'd originally carried the musket. No, it was gone; that meant that one of the two remaining soldiers now had a musket. Which one? One was in the bushes on the right side of the path, the other on the left. If he went after the wrong one, the man with the musket would have a clear shot at his back. But which was the right one?

"Come on out," he called.

His voice echoed back to him, and a light sweat formed on his brow. He brushed this away with the back of his hand. "Come on out," he yelled again.

A shot sang out from the left side of the path, the ball whipped past Johnny's ear, sending a slice of wood flying into the air from the oak behind him.

"Thanks," Johnny said. Slowly, he began to advance toward the sound of the shot, his eyes watching the bushes to the right of the path, too.

THE SECOND shot came suddenly, almost too suddenly; he hadn't thought a man could load that fast. The ball sliced into his right arm, searing through like a red-hot needle. He dropped his musket and gripped his arm tightly, watching the blood erupt on the brownness of his skin. The pain was excruciating, and it reached up into his head, blurring his eyes. He clenched his teeth together, dropping to the ground; he closed his eyes for a moment, then jerked them open as he heard the rustle of twigs.

The open end of a musket was aimed at his head. He stared at it in fascination for a moment, suddenly realizing that a man was behind the yawning hole, a man waiting to pull a trigger. He rolled over onto his right arm, feeling the pain jerk up to his shoulder, reaching for his pistol with his left hand. The ball from the musket sent a shower of dirt into his eyes. Clearing the pistol from his belt, he fired without straightening his arm, whipping the shot off as the gun came clear. He saw the soldier grasp at his eyes, saw the spattering of blood, and then heard a noise behind him.

Sword drawn, the last patrolman stalked him, bearing down fast. Johnny had time to see the man he'd shot collapse against the bushes. And the next instant, he was battling for his life.

He heard the menacing *whick* of the sword-blade as it sliced past his ear. He wished he could reload, realized how foolish that was. He saw the gleam in the soldier's eyes, a dull gleam, a gleam that spelled *Death* in big black letters. He saw sweat on the other man's brow, noticed grey hairs in the man's otherwise black moustache, noticed all these things in the split second it took for him to unsheath his dagger.

He leaped to his feet as the sword lunged again, closer this time. "Come on, *Ingles*," the soldier called.

"Come on," Johnny echoed.

The patrolman moved closer, his sword probing the air before him, the tip moving in a tiny circle. "Come on, *Ingles*. Taste the steel."

"You have the big blade," Johnny answered. "Make your play."

He held his dagger with the point up, as if ready to ward off a hand-to-hand attack; then, gambling everything on the move, he whipped his arm

upward, releasing the dagger, throwing it underhand.

A little gasp of surprise escaped the other's lips as he realized what was happening. And then, his eyes opened wide in terror as the new realization struck home: the realization that he was too late to *stop* what was happening. He seemed to watch the moving dagger with fascination, his eyes growing wider and wider.

At the last moment, he tried to step aside. The dagger made a slight whishing sound as it sliced through his vest and thudded home to the hilt. The man gripped the knife handle, then released it instantly, as if he'd decided to pull it out and then had changed his mind. He toppled forward, his face hitting the ground, his body slipping down into the dust.

Johnny rolled him over and yanked the blade free, watching the torrent of blood that spilled down the man's front. He dried the knife on his breeches, becoming aware of the pain in his arm again. It was beginning to throb now, a dull throb, almost like a beating heart embedded in the muscle of his arm. He ripped off his shirt, tore it into narrow strips, and bandaged the wound as best he could. He knew one thing.

He would have to go back to his cabin.

•

HE SWUNG around in a wide circle, avoiding the path and avoiding the river, heading down toward the bay. He'd cut back, then, heading for his cabin. They'd expect him to come down from the woods; he might catch them off-guard if he swung up from the sea.

He met no further resistance in the woods, reaching the beach without seeing another soul. He ran down the beach, the pain in his arm almost unbearable, now, more anxious than ever to reach his cabin. He would have to contact Ama when he was home again. Or perhaps it was Ama who'd lighted the fire—perhaps she was living in his cabin, waiting for him. No, that was unlikely: Ama's father was a soldier, under orders from Barbazzo. They would hardly allow her to live in his cabin. He wondered if they'd discovered her visit to him last night. He wondered...

Ai—ai—ai—ai
Canta no llores
Porque cand...

The singing stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Johnny's hand flew to the dagger at his waist. His eyes scanned the beach. He was thoroughly alert, his throat muscles stiff and taut. "It's only me, *amigo,*" a voice said in Spanish.

Johnny's eyes shifted slightly, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. He spotted the man, then, dressed in the colorful garb of a sailor, sprawled flat on his stomach behind a sand-dune. Johnny's hand relaxed on the knife. Thoughts ran through his head rapidly. *With the sleeve covering my hair, I can pass for a Spaniard. And perhaps this sailor doesn't know anything about me, anyway.*

"Did you stumble?" he asked in Spanish, hoping his faltering use of the language would not betray him.

"Stumble? Aye, I've stumbed—stumbled I have."

Johnny smelled liquor on the man's breath as he stooped to help him to his feet; he knew, then, that however clumsy his Spanish was, this was one sailor who wouldn't notice. The sailor found his footing, then staggered back against Johnny's shoulder. Johnny wrapped his good arm about the sailor's waist, smiling at the man's unsteadiness.

"A thousand pardons, *amigo,*" the sailor said, grinning foolishly. "Luis is not always drunk." He giggled.

"Luis, that is me, *amigo*. Luis is drunk."

"Luis is very drunk," Johnny said.

"*Si*, very, very drunk, without doubt." Luis belched, and Johnny smelled the heavy alcohol-odor. It made him a little dizzy. He tightened his grip about the sailor's waist.

"Are you off the *San Carlos?*" Johnny asked. His head was beginning to swim, and he wondered vaguely why the alcohol fumes were affecting him so. Luis spat into the sand.

"The *San Carlos*, aye! A floating corner of Hell! I tell you, *amigo*..."

Johnny put his hand to his eyes, trying to focus them correctly. The beach began to tilt; sky, and sand, and sea leaning over at a precarious angle. He saw the anxious face of the sailor up close, mouth open, gold teeth shining.

"*Amigo*," Luis said in surprise, "you are bleeding. Your arm..."

Johnny felt the strength leave his legs, suddenly rush out of them, leaving him weak and drained. And then the sand reached up and slapped him in the face.

•

THERE WAS a swishing sound that grew closer and then receded. It reached at his mind in the blackness probing timidly at his consciousness. He blinked open his eyes, saw a vaster blackness overhead, a blackness pinpointed with blinking stars. Beneath his flat palms, he felt the coarse sand of the beach; when he heard the swishing sound again, he realized he was hearing waves lapping against the shore.

"Ah, *Ingles*," the voice said; "you are awake."

He reached for his dagger, then felt restraining fingers tighten on his wrist. Immediately, his right hand went to his head, throbbing with pain again. He lowered it, but not before he'd learned the cap that had covered his blond hair was gone.

"It's all right, *Ingles*," the voice said; "this is me. Luis."

Luis. Where have I heard that name before? Luis. Someone at the fort? No. No, it isn't...

He grinned in the darkness. "You're the sailor," he said.

"*Si*, I am the sailor. I am sober now, *amigo*, and I know something I didn't know before."

"What's that?"

"You, my friend, are no Spaniard."

Johnny's face went blank, and his eyes flicked up into the sailor's.

"That is all right, *Ingles*. Luis is a man who asks very few questions. What is even better, Luis never *answers* any questions, either."

"You'd better get back to your ship," Johnny said. He sat up, shaking his head. "You'll get in trouble if you stay here."

Luis grinned, the two gold teeth in the front of his mouth catching the moonlight and gleaming. "I am in trouble already. I was to be back on the *San Carlos* by sundown; it is now past midnight."

Johnny looked at the sailor and said, "Now look, I certainly appreciate all..."

"No, no, please do not get the wrong idea, *Ingles*. You have nothing to do with my not being aboard the *San Carlos*. I was ready to leave, anyway. I do not much care for the sea."

Johnny stood up and took a deep breath. "Why'd you become a sailor then?"

"I thought to see New Spain."

"And?"

"I have seen it." Luis spat into the sand. "I do not like it; I do not like the way things are being done."

"Then why don't you go back to your ship?"

"I like that even less, *amigo*."

"But you'll be going home," Johnny insisted.

Luis spread his hands wide. "You do not understand, my friend. At home, I have nothing; I would not have come

to New Spain if I was content at home. But now that I am here, there is still nothing. And aboard ship—*pfagh!*"

JOHNNY sighed deeply, wondering what next to say.

"I bore you," Luis said, smiling. "You have your own problems. But your people know how I feel."

"Sure," Johnny said, "I know how you feel."

"A thing like that, where fellow-citizens fight each other—that is bad."

"Sure," Johnny said.

"Why are you not with them, *amigo?* Why are you in California?"

Johnny's brow creased. "Why am I not with whom?"

"Your people, in the East; you are a colonist, are you not?"

"I don't follow you."

"The British colonists are fighting against the other British. You know, the *British* British." Luis shook his head violently, exasperated by his inability to express himself.

"Where? What are you talking about?"

"Here, here in America. In the East. You did not know, *amigo?*"

"A civil war, you mean? Here? In this country?"

"*Si.* Only they do not call it that; they call it a revolution."

"My people?" Johnny still couldn't grasp the concept.

"*Si, si,* your people. You are British, no?"

"Yes," Johnny said, feeling British for the first time in a very long while. "Yes, I am."

Luis nodded. "Well, that is how it is; the American British are protesting the tax, you know?"

"I didn't know," Johnny said. He was shaking his head dumbly.

"*Si,*" Luis said.

They started walking up the beach, neither man speaking for a long while. Johnny shook his head, as if trying to clear it. "I have a cabin here, Luis, and a little land. It's all I've ever known. My friends are a handful of Indians. I hunt, and trap, and I grow a few things. That's my life, Luis."

"*Si.*"

"I've been here always. My mother died when I was born, and my father was killed by a drunken Indian when I was fourteen. This is my life, Luis, everything I've ever known."

"I understand, *amigo.*"

"If you understand, then tell me why your news of a revolution has hit me so hard. Tell me why I suddenly do not want to stay here in California any more. Why do I want to go East, Luis? Why do I want to go help? Tell me that, Luis."

Luis grinned and put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "I told you before, *amigo*—I am not so good at answering questions."

"There's someone I want to get, Luis," Johnny said softly. "I hope she's where I think she is." He quickened his pace.

"Wait for me," Luis said.

•

THERE WERE four horses in Johnny's barn. There would have been three if he'd allowed the Spaniard to tax him two days ago. He passed the barn and peered inside, then turned his eyes to the cabin.

"There is a light," Luis said.

"Mmmm."

"I will stay with the horses, *amigo;* be quick."

Johnny kept in the shadow of the barn, then dodged for cover behind the tree in front of the cabin. He waited for the moon to disappear behind a cloud, then ran to the side of the cabin, dropping down below the edge of the window. Slowly, he lifted his eyes over the ledge. Ama was sitting before the fire-place. She was wearing a white blouse, the top of which hung loose over one browned shoulder.

He felt his pulse quicken at the sight of her, and his eyes drank hungrily of her beauty. Quickly, he ran to the front of the cabin and threw open the door.

Ama leaped to her feet and started to cross the room.

"Johnny, Johnny." She saw his arm then, and her hand went to her mouth. "Your arm. They've..."

"It'll be all right," he said hastily. "I'm leaving, Ama; I'm going East. I want you to come with me. I knew it would be you here. I knew it was impossible, and still I knew it was you." The words rushed out in a torrent.

"Johnny..." She rushed to him and he folded her into his arms, smelling the clean sweetness of her hair again, remembering once more the touch of her flesh.

"Will you come with me, Ama? Say you will, darling. We'll leave all this: Barbazzo, San Francisco, soldiers..."

The voice was strong and harsh, speaking in precise, clipped English. "You will leave nothing, *senor*."

Johnny threw Ama to one side and reached for the dagger at his waist, turning to face the figure who stood in the open door to the adjoining room.

"I couldn't warn you, Johnny," Ama said, fright in her eyes. "They forced me to come here; they..."

"We knew you would seek her out, eventually," the figure in the doorway said. He was tall, with straight black hair combed back from his forehead. Two shaggy black brows were raised in faint amusement over deep brown eyes. The corners of his mouth were tilted upward, lifting the tips of his pencil-line moustache. He wore a lace collar at his throat, a silk jerkin and scabbard.

"I'm leaving, Barbazzo," Johnny said.

Barbazzo drew his sword slowly, the steel rasping softly against the inside of the scabbard. "Are you?" he asked, his eyebrows still lifted.

Johnny kept his eyes glued to the sword. "I don't like it here any more, Barbazzo; I haven't liked it ever since you got here."

"A pity, *senor*." The sword was in his hand now, steel blade bare in the light of the table lamp.

"I thought I'd fight you all, Bar-

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bazzo—a one-man war against every Spaniard in San Francisco. I see, now, that I was wrong."

Barbazzo glanced down at the sharp steel. "Yes," he said. "A sword has a way of making a man realize his mistakes."

"Don't get me wrong, Barbazzo. I'll still kill you if you try to stop me from leaving. But there are more important things than Spaniards in San Francisco. Much more important."

"Perhaps," Barbazzo said, grinning tightly.

"Are you coming with me, Ama?" Johnny asked, keeping his eyes on Barbazzo.

"Yes, Johnny; you know I am."

Johnny took her arm and they began backing away toward the door. He kept his eyes on Barbazzo's sword, waiting for the Spaniard to make his move.

"Ama should have told you a little more about the reception we had planned for you, *senor.*" He smiled again. "But then, perhaps she didn't know."

He glanced at the front door to the cabin. "Juan! Pedro!" he shouted suddenly. "Take the *Ingles!*"

JOHNNY heard the door behind him slam open, hunched his shoulders as he anticipated the swift rush of steel between his shoulder blades. He felt the wind reach the back of his neck. His eyes wandered to Barbazzo's face. There was an incredulous expression in the man's eyes. It was then that Johnny turned to see who stood in the doorway.

"It's all right, *Ingles,*" a familiar voice said. "This is me. Luis."

He turned to see the beaming face of the sailor. Luis was holding a cocked musket in his heavy hands, and the musket was pointed across the room at Barbazzo. Luis shook his head sadly. "You should build a fence, *amigo;* there were two coyotes outside." He shook his head sadly. "I had to kill them."

Barbazzo's face went pale. He looked through the open doorway and shouted, "Juan! Pedro!"

"I do not think they will answer, *senor,*" Luis said.

An animal bellow wrenched free from Barbazzo's throat; he swung his sword up in a wide arc and lunged across the room, his eyes on Johnny.

The musket exploded with a vicious roar, filling the room with black smoke. Barbazzo charged forward, the ball ripping into his chest, tearing silk, leather, flesh. His eyes popped, and his fingers opened, dropping the sword to the floor. The point stuck in the heavy planking as Barbazzo slumped forward, down to his knees. He swayed on his knees, opened his mouth, and then toppled over, his shoulder brushing against the sword stuck in the floor.

The sword swayed back and forth like a pendulum, casting a thin, swinging shadow on the floor.

"Let's get out of here," Johnny said.

He put his arm around Ama, and followed Luis out of the cabin. In the yard outside, they walked around the still bodies of two soldiers. Luis had saddled three horses. He helped Ama up, first, then lifted Johnny into the saddle, careful not to brush against his wounded arm. They rode out of the barn and up the hill, pushing the horses at a wild gallop. At the crest of the hill, they wheeled their horses around and stared down at the cabin.

For a moment, Johnny felt a deep pang of regret, but he buried this immediately, holding Ama's hand tightly in his own.

"What is there in the East, Johnny?" she asked.

He shrugged and grinned at Luis. Then he put his arm around Ama and said, "A few people who don't like paying taxes, darling."

She grinned back at him, and they turned away from the cabin, riding off into the darkness.

★

★ True Fact Story ★

by Wade Hamilton

The Last Raid

THEY WERE hanging golden-haired Russian Bill in Shakespeare, Territory of New Mexico, and on the hotel table beside the condemned man stood another gent who was doomed to test hemp—one Sandy King. Nooses were already fitted around their necks. Ropes were thrown and tied over the high-beamed hotel ceiling.

"Got anythin' to say, Sandy?"

Sandy King said, in a cracked voice, "I wanna big slug of whiskey; where I'm goin', they tell me they ain't no hard likker."

Sandy King got his drink, a big slug. Eyes turned on Russian Bill. "Any last wish you craves, Roosian Bill?"

Perhaps the irony of the situation overcame its gravity, for witnesses say that the big Russian smiled. "If it pleases you men, I wish you'd pull my hair out from the inside of this noose. That rope is too uncomfortable with my long hair under it."

Nobody laughed. A man climbed up on the table and solemnly arranged the noose so the long golden locks were on the outside of the rope; then the man climbed down.

"Thank you, friend."

"Anything else, Roosian Bill?"

Russian Bill shook his handsome head, and his long golden hair glistened in the sunlight that came through the windows of the Pioneer House. "Nothing, thank you."

Perhaps he caught the irony of this. He, an educated man, could recite the Bard's great words correctly and at some length; and here he was doomed to die in this jerkwater desert town, named after the great Avon poet.

Maybe that made him smile, for witnesses say he died with a smile.

Or, perhaps something else prompted that smile. They were hanging Russian Bill for the crime of stealing a buckskin horse. He had stolen the bronc over in Galeyville, Arizona. His was that he had taken a bronc belong-

ing to a Shakespeare resident, who had merely ridden over to Galeyville on business.

While he was in jail they had brought in Sandy King for doing some gunwork. Sandy had shot up the town, and irate citizens demanded death for Sandy, who was a well-known tough with a dubious backtrail which might have included a few killings. Other citizens fell into line, and to make it a clean sweep the demand went up that Russian Bill stretch a rope also.

"Hang 'em both t'onct!"

"But the Roosian only stoled a bronc; he never kilt nobody. Won't be fair to him."

"Nah, he h'ain't kilt nobody, but he might; hang him 'cause he might!"

So here they stood—killer and horsethief—with fitted nooses. But this was dragging out too long; the owner of the Pioneer House glanced at the clock. "Men, it's right close to supper time, it is, an' I need the table to serve my customers. Get this over with pronto an' let me set the table!"

"Jerk out the table, men!"

So died Sandy King and Russian Bill.

RUSSIAN BILL'S life of outlawry was short; in fact, he wasn't even an outlaw—only a hanger-on who wanted to act tough, but who didn't have much guts. Compared with some of his erstwhile friends, he was a rank amateur.

He toted two big Colts, he tied them low, and he rode a big bronc. He was handsome and gaudy, but not dangerous. This was in Tombstone—Arizona Territory—and Tombstone was wild. Boothill Cemetery, with its many graves, is a silent testimonial today of the silver-town's outlawry.

He hung around with Curly Bill Brocius, and John Ringo, and that bunch. They robbed stages, stole horses, and indulged in other nefarious pursuits. The silver they stole vanished quickly over the bars, and into the stockings of the mining-town's "lovelies;" the horses they stole went south of Old Mexico. On the return trip they stole Mex broncs for sale north of the Border.

Gradually, Russian Bill worked into Brocius' confidence. He was an outstanding figure—even in this town of weird and outstanding figures—for he looked out of place with his fine clothes and long golden hair.

"Where you from, Roosian Bill?"

Curly was abrupt. This was a dangerous question to ask in this town that had "a dead man for breakfast every morning." And a man a day was killed in Tombstone for a long time.

Russian Bill smiled.

"You got a foreign handle, Roosian Bill."

"Maybe I am a Russian."

Brocius had given his companion a long scrutiny. "You don't look like no Roosian to me." He was puzzled about this man; during the time he and Russian Bill were friends he never did find out about Russian Bill's past. Only after Russian Bill's death did his real identity become known; by that time Curly was out of circulation.

Many times gang members wondered about the past of this well-dressed man, but Russian Bill had only irrelevant answers to their hints and questions.

"Quite a dude," a gambler told Brocius.

"Maybe a *tough* dude, eh?"

CURLY BILL got in a gun-ruckus with Jim Wallace in Galeyville. He wasn't killed, but Jim shot him up bad; Wallace jumped the country to escape Curly's gang. Russian Bill heard about his pard coming out second-best and rode fast to aid Brocius.

"Don't cotton to the way your wound lays, Curly. I don't like this desert country for a sick man; it's too hot. We head for that camp on the Negrito and I'll nurse you into good shape."

"Me, I wanna git a hunk outa Wallace's hide."

"He jumped the Border, Curly; you gotta get well first."

They camped for a month on the cool reaches of the Negrito. Russian Bill turned out to be a good cook, and a still better nurse and doctor. He kept infection away from Curly's wound and had him on his feet in a week.

"Where'd you learn this doctorin', Roosian Bill?"

"Maybe in Russia."

A vague, uncertain reply that could be ironic or truthful; Brocius pushed questions no further. When they rode out of the Negrito country, the gang leader was himself again. From then on if Russian Bill got into a scrape he could not handle, Brocius brought it to a successful conclusion. . . usually with his six-shooter.

But Russian Bill, so old-timers report, was sort of unhappy. He was a member of Curly's gang but not because of his toughness—only because he had nursed the outlaw-boss back to health.

Maybe this bothered him.

Anyway, he started drinking a little too much. All the gang drank to excess, but Russian Bill suddenly seemed in love with liquor.

One day he was in Galeyville standing on the street and he was full of whisky. A gunman came along and Russian Bill quoted, *"A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse."* The source of the words was unknown to the gunslick, and he thought Bill meant them.

"You sure need a good bronc, Russian Bill; that cayuse of yours is about done in. Why don't you steal a good hoss from one of the hitchracks, ride him through town, with your guns hootin' an' shootin'?"

Gravely the drunken Russian Bill considered this deal.

"That'd put a clincher on your rep as a tough gink, Roosian Bill."

Those words did it. "Need a new horse, Joe."

"How about that long-laigged buckskin tied in front of the *Emporium*. Totes a better saddle than yourn an' stirrups are about the same length, too. Just borry thet buckskin an' leave your horse."

"A horse, a horse, my kingdom for— Nice-lookin' horse, he is."

He led his tired bay over to the hitchrack and tied him beside the buckskin. He untied the buckskin's reins. He looked up and down the street; the hot sun had driven all sober and sensible men inside.

Another True Fact Feature

DINEH!

The Story of The Navajo
by Lauran Paine

appears in the July issue of

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

Russian Bill climbed on board the buckskin, pulled his gun and rode wildly out of town, his six-shooter blasting holes in the heated air. A few days later he rode into the mining camp of Shakespeare. Seemingly, there had been no pursuit; if a posse had followed, he had not seen it.

Russian Bill was hardly known here; in fact, more people knew the buckskin than knew him. The horse belonged to Joe Pryor, a Shakespeare resident, who had merely been visiting in Galeyville.

Russian Bill came down in front of the *Silver Saloon*. The good smell of coffee and ham came from the doors of the bar. He was very interested in food, and it was not until Sheriff Tucker spoke that the long-haired man knew his plan had broken.

"You're under arrest, fella."

"Arrest, my good man! Why?"

"Thet buckskin belongs to Joe Pryor; it was stole off'n him over in Galeyville. Joe's right in town now—bought a hoss to get home—and you're goin' to the calaboose."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

So Russian Bill, long hair and all, went to the local clink. He got word out to Curly Bill Brocius; Curly would break him out of this joint. But Curly had run into a little tough luck, too, and so Russian Bill died on the gallows.

But his story does not end with his death.

TWO MONTHS later Mayor Thomas of Tombstone received a document through the mail. It was very impressive; it was laden with sealing wax and addressed simply to *The Mayor, Tombstone, Arizona Territory, United States of America*. And it was from St. Petersburg, Russia.

"Now what the hades is this, anyway?"

"Never know till you open it, Yore Honor."

It was from the U. S. Consul General. The Czar had asked him to write to Tombstone, and various other towns, to ask if anybody knew the whereabouts of one Lieutenant William Tattenbaum of the Czar's Imperial White Hussars.

"Never heard of nobody by that name, Yore Honor."

His Honor read further into the letter. Lieutenant William Tattenbaum had wounded his superior officer and fled; they had fought over a woman. Charges had been dropped, however, and Lieutenant Tattenbaum's mother was worried about her son. The Czar was worried, too; Mrs. Tattenbaum was a Lady-in-Waiting to the Czarina.

A photo of the lieutenant was enclosed. Townsmen peered at the picture of the clean-shaven, hair-trimmed young man in his snappy uniform.

"Nice-lookin' gent, but I don't recollect seein' him."

"Me, neither."

One man gasped, "Holy Smoke, that's Roosian Bill—afore he let his hair to his shoulders. Sure it is, men!"

They all recognized him then. "An' we hung him over in Shakespeare; now what'll we tell his mother?"

The mayor finally came to the rescue. "We cain't bust that good woman's heart. I'll write her a letter tellin' her her son is in the cattle business, is a big cowman, an' asked me to write to her an' tell her all is fine."

"But she'll want to write direct to her son?"

The mayor had an answer to that, too. "I'll finish it by sayin' a bronc fell with Roosian Bill—I mean the Looie—an' busted his neck. He died of a busted neck, you know."

This matter settled, they all repaired to the *Crystal Palace*, there to drink toasts to the dead man. For, as the mayor put it, they had to have a reason for getting drunk, didn't they?

"An' that's a good reason, Yore Honor."

★

Know Your West

(continued from page 8)

to Henry Tyler. Old man Falk had a certain affection for the blond youth, who was already known in the territory as "the man who can try anything and make it work." He counted the small pile of bills on the table and then remarked, "Well, that's the first payment, Henry; you got five months for the balance, and then the ranch is yours. Can't say I didn't try to talk you out of this deal. But it's your money and you spend it as you like; still can't see how you expect to make money on the ranch." Henry carefully folded the legal document and placed it in a large leather wallet, which then went into an inside pocket of his vest. He spoke slowly and rather assuredly for a fellow who was yet to see his twenty-fourth birthday.

"There's a time coming soon when free land is going to be scarce. You got a valid title to all this land, and it's got water; but within ten years, the railroad will be running to the south of this land. Then there won't be that long drive to Hunters Points with the cattle. Meanwhile, if you don't mind. Mr. Falk, I got to be on my way. Thank the missus for wanting me to stay for some of that nice food she cooks, but I got to pick up my wagon-train in the pass."

It was the unwritten law in the West that you don't poke your nose into the other fellow's business. "Just don't ask questions," was the safest way of getting on with folks. But old man Falk was curious, like everyone else in the territory, about the wagon-train that Henry ran from the end of the railroad to the southern part of the territory.

"Be it true," he asked, "that you use buffalo instead of oxen? They say you got those critters so tame they eat out of your hand."

Henry always smiled when they asked him that question. "If you want to see for yourself, come on and ride with me down to the pass. Take only two hours."

Old Man Falk thought about the heavy biscuits his wife was baking. If he could sneak out of the house, he wouldn't have to eat them and suffer all night. His answer was to the point. "Let's start a-riding; the sooner the better."

ISAAC WARD was wagon-master, and in charge of the trail at the pass; he greeted his boss and old man Falk. Each one of the wagons was drawn by six yoke, or twelve buffalo, and could thus carry from five to six thousand pounds of freight. Twenty-five of the wagons made up a train.

"The buffalo is the easiest animal to domesticate," explained Henry. "Very easy to break them to the yoke, and anyone can manage them. At streams they never make a break for water, like oxen. Within six months of domestication, his wild instincts and habits are gone forever."

The wagon-master was a bit impatient. "We gotta start now, Mr. Tyler," he interrupted. "We got a hard load to pull, and the railroad won't hold them cars for us longer than Tuesday."

Henry said goodby to Old Man Falk, and was about to leave when the rancher wanted the answer to one more question. "Stop my mouth, if I shouldna asked it, but how come you got a load in them wagons going back? And to ship on the railroad, too."

Henry wondered just what to say. To give no answer wouldn't be the right thing to do. And to give the truthful answer would probably keep

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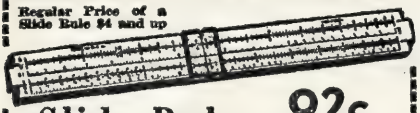

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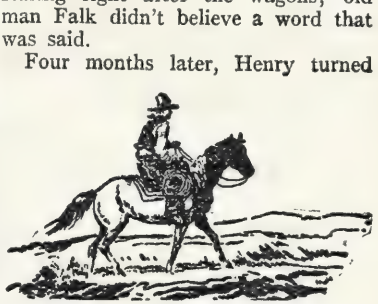
the old man up at night. He finally decided to tell him what he was carrying in the wagons and replied, "Buffalo Bones."

As the train went on its way, Henry could see the rancher on his horse staring right after the wagons; old man Falk didn't believe a word that was said.

Four months later, Henry turned



up at the ranch. "Ahead of time, Mr. Falk," he explained, "and I don't want to carry the cash with me. So I'm paying you the balance I owe on the ranch, now."

Slowly the rancher counted the money offered to him. "Every dollar, to the cent," he said, "and I bet from Buffalo Bones." He said that with a sly smile on his face.

"Buffalo Bones made the money," replied Henry. "I've been picking them up on the plains and shipping and selling them in St. Louis. Get $15.00 a ton for the bones. They are sold to the carbon works, where the newer bones are prepared for use in refining sugar; the old weather-beaten ones are ground up for fertilizer. The horns are sold for 1 to 1 1/2 cents a pound and turned into combs and buttons. Yes, sir, who would believe this is the ranch Buffalo Bones bought me?"

QUESTION: Can you spot the big error in this story? If you didn't get it the first time, you may have to reread the story.

(You'll find the answer at the end of this department.)

[*Turn To Page* 108]

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LUCKY LADY MINE

MR. RANDLOPHER James Wilton was doing his best not to appear nervous and overanxious, as he sat in the assayer's office in Wilton City. One look at his clothing, and you spotted the Easterner, written in big letters. He was already on his second chin; his black hair was graying, and his stomach showed his desire for good food. He turned to his partner, Sidney Louis McGrail, a thin small man, who also hailed from the seaboard.

The assayer came to the front of the office and both men looked at him. Mr. Wilton asked a one-word question. "Well?"

In turn, the assayer handed him a written report. "You will find it all on this sheet, exactly as I analyzed the ore you brought to me."

Mr. Wilton's two small eyes almost popped out of his head as he read the report. "Sidney," he said with a noticeable tremor in his voice, "we are millionaires! Praise be the good Lord for having directed us to this city; now we go to the mine and take up our option."

Willie Ceasar, alias Sam Jennings, alias Sure-shot Joe, was pouring himself another full glass of whiskey in his shack at the "Lucky Lady Mine." The scar across his face did no justice to a man who once had been a beau brummel. He turned to his partner. "Mike, it doesn't seem possible that such fools grow up in the East and bring their hard-earned cash out to the West. This sure is better than trying to hold up the stagecoach. And is it simple to do! We bought ten wagon-loads of ore from the 'Daisy Jane' mine out in the hills; we located a worthless ledge, sank a shaft, and dumped our ore right into the shaft. And then these two fools came around. They know less than nothin' about mining! Soon as we get the rest of their cash, we head straight for the border. There's

[*Turn To Page* 110]

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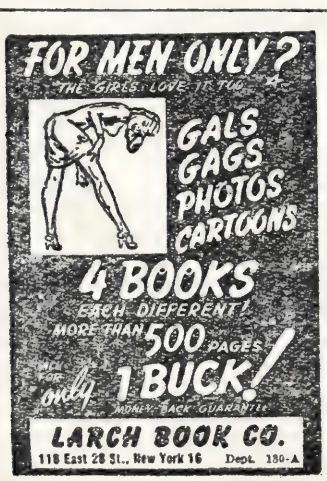

a certain gal I want to see, and will I be welcome!"

MR. RANDLOPHER James Wilton and his partner were in the shack that was serving as a business office. "I would like to make an alcohol-test myself, right here, from some of the ore I took out of the shaft," he said.

"Go suit yourself," replied Mike Gorin. "There's a bottle and some alcohol. All you do is to put the ore in the bottle, one-fifth full; add a measure of alcohol; shake for five minutes, and watch the metal float to the top."

Mr. Wilton followed instructions, and his face beamed with satisfaction. "If you gentlemen will give my partner and myself the signed deed, we will turn over to you the sum of $50,000 in ten-dollar bills. They are in the canvas bag that Mr. McGrail has at his side."

The deed was turned over and the cash changed hands. "Don't think I'm a fool," said Mr. Ceasar, as he and his mining-partner were about to leave the shack, "but I got to go back to Canada. My poor mother has suffered a heart-attack; Doctor says she hasn't long to live. And my poor mother was always my best friend. So you know the real reason I'm selling you this mine at such a dirt cheap price."

Willie Ceasar and his partner avoided all towns on their trip to the border; they carried enough grub with them so that it would not be necessary to stop in at any store and get needed food. As they rode to their destination Willie couldn't help remarking, "I bet their faces must be red when they discovered how we salted the mine. Bet they'll want the sheriff to arrest that fellow in the assayer's office. Maybe they'll want the cavalry bring us in dead or alive. The rest of our lives we can live without worry."

[*Turn To Page* 112]

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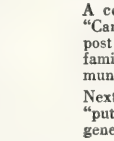

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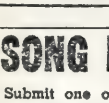

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The stage from Wilton City had only two passengers on this trip; two Easterns going back to their home territory. Mr. Randlopher James Wilton sat facing his partner.

"I don't think we were cut out to be mine-operators," he said to his friend. And Sidney Louis McGrail was not the kind of man to disagree with the better half of the partnership. A small smile began to creep over his face, then he laughed and laughed until his sides almost split. Mr. Wilton merely remarked, "Wait till they try to pass those counterfeit bills we gave them; I always said those plates were no good. Got a letter from Dave. Says he got a good set of plates lined up for us."

QUESTION: Can you spot the big error in this story? If you didn't get it the first time, you may have to reread the story.

(You'll find the answer at the end of this department.)

●

ANSWER TO "TROUBLE ON THE RANGE"

What the sheep man says about the cattle is all wrong! This happens to be exactly what the cattle men say about the sheep!

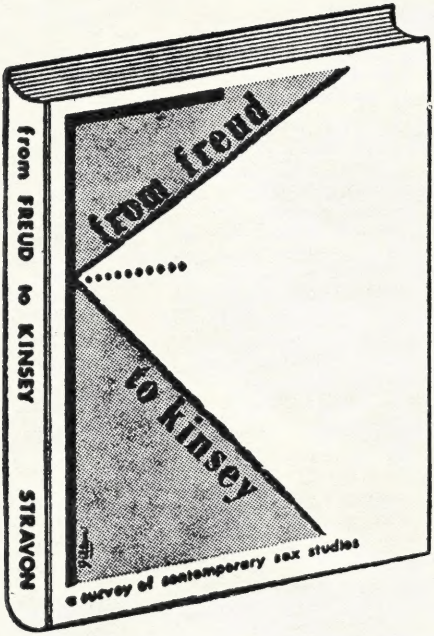
References: *The Story of the Frontier* by Everett Dick, Ph.D., Tudor Publishing Co., N.Y. 1941. Chapter XXLL: "With The Woolies". *The Story of the Cowboy* by Emerson Hough, D. Appleton and Co., N.Y. 1901. Chapter XVI: "Wars of the Range." *The Cowboy* by Phillip Ashton Rollins, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1936. See pages 36-37.

●

ANSWER TO "HENRY'S BUFFALOES"

The complete domestication of the

[*Turn To Page* 114]



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buffalo is impossible, and you couldn't run a successful wagon-train with them. How about the Buffalo Bones? That's straight stuff and correct!

References: *The American Bison* by Martin S. Garretson, published by New York Zoological Society (1938). Pages 160-163 for story about the bones being sold. Chapter XIV: "Domestication of the Buffalo." See also: *Westward America* by Howard R. Driggs. Somerset Books, Inc. 1942. Pages 61-62 also for story about buffalo bones.

ANSWER TO "LUCKY LADY MINE"

You can't test for ore with alcohol in a jar and shake it. Impossible. How about the salting of the mine with real ore? That's straight stuff and correct!

References: *Digging Gold Among the Rockies* by G. Thomas Ingham. Cottage Library Publishing Co. 1881. Pages 396-397 for salting a mine. Rest of the book on miners and mining techniques up to that day. For silver mining also see: *The Big Bonanza* by Dan De Quille (basic source book on Comstock lode), reissued in 1947 by Alfred A. Knopf. For gold mining see: *The Shirley Letters,* from the California Mines, reissued in 1949 by Alfred A. Knopf. In *Roughing It* by Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) he gives examples of salting a mine.

★

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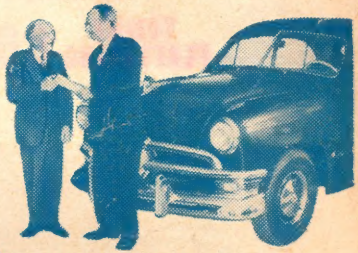

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